16. The Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge Revisited: Relativism, Skepticism, Reductionism

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1. Introduction

The question 'What does philosophy owe to its history?' can be interpreted in different ways, depending on what types of philosophy, or what modes of historical writing, one has in mind. Here by different 'types of philosophy' I am thinking less of sub-disciplines (like logic or ethics), and more of broad schools of thought, like 'analytic philosophy' or 'Continental thought'. And by 'modes of historical writing' I am referring to fields like 'intellectual history', 'conceptual history', 'psychohistory' or 'social history'.

For instance, Continental thought prominently includes philosophers – like Hegel or Heidegger – whose work features *philosophies of* (intellectual or conceptual) *history*. That is to say, for these thinkers, philosophy is something like a reconstruction of its own historical development. And the answer to the question 'What does philosophy owe to its history?' is therefore simply: everything. Or consider philosophers in the Marxist tradition. They too would insist that we cannot do philosophy without much detailed history, though here the relevant history is less the intellectual history of philosophy but the social and economic history of ideological (often: philosophical) beliefs.

Philosophy of history is much less salient in the analytic tradition. Indeed, a good number of analytic philosophers believe that the history of philosophy is a sub-discipline separate from ethics, logic or epistemology; valuable in its own right, but not essentially linked to present-day systematic concerns. Of course, there are also numerous important analytic

historians of philosophy, and most of them are convinced that historical work is of much more than antiquarian interest. One could distinguish here between *modest* and *ambitious* views. The former insist merely that a good understanding of the past makes us appreciate the historicity of our present-day preoccupations. The more ambitious claim is that we today can learn from past figures how to do our philosophy better.

Despite all the differences between the analytic philosophers and Continental thinkers, almost all of them agree on one idea: that a social or sociological history of philosophy is only of very limited interest or value to philosophers. The key assumption behind this idea is that a sociological study of philosophy cannot but reduce philosophical arguments to social-political interests, to power or ideology. To be sure, philosophers of all stripes often welcome such reductive accounts of the views of their opponents. But they regard them as nothing short of misplaced and absurd when their own views, or the views of their most cherished predecessors, are in question.

Historians or sociologists of science will find this pattern of responses familiar. In history and philosophy of science it too was once thought – and perhaps still is thought today in some remote quarters – that sociological reconstructions of scientific content must be out to debunk or discredit. And yet, this view is no longer as widespread as it was thirty or forty years ago. By now, it is widely accepted that a social history of science is possible; that such history is essential for understanding the historical trajectory of scientific theories and practices; and that it can be done in ways that do justice to both the contents and the contexts of scientific work.

It is disappointing that these insights from the sociology and social history of science have left so few marks on work in systematic philosophy or the history of philosophy. Perhaps it saddens me more than most, since I first tried to generate interest in the 'Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge', or 'SPK' for short, more than twenty years ago. I coined the term in analogy to the 'Sociology of Scientific Knowledge', or 'SSK'. My book *Psychologism*

(published in 1995) is perhaps the best-known of my publications of that period in my life (cf. Kusch 1999, 2000). I suspect that I owe the invitation to contribute to the present volume to this old work of mine. And thus I shall focus on SPK again here.

Unfortunately, I have (as yet) no new case studies in the sociology of philosophical knowledge to offer and, alas, there are no other, more recent, studies in the same field that would make for a natural starting point. For want of a better idea, I shall therefore revisit my old book in a critical, constructive and comparative spirit. I shall begin with a brief summary of *Psychologism* since I do not want to assume familiarity with the book. Subsequently I shall identify two key influences and discuss two recent studies that might be seen as sociological alternatives to what I have tried to do in the 1990s. I shall make some critical comments on these alternative. Finally, lest I appear self-righteous, I shall formulate two objections to my own old work before turning to the question where the philosophical relevance of the SPK might lie.

2. Psychologism – a summary

Psychologism aims to show 'how a philosophical fact can be sociologically deconstructed'. Here, 'philosophical facts' are 'statements in philosophy that fulfil the criteria of a) being widely accepted, i.e. being incorporated into the standard textbooks, b) being such that they cannot be ignored or bypassed whenever one works in the respective field, and which c) can be used without further argument to support new statements' (Kusch 1995: 28).

The 'fact' my book focuses on is the claim:

(H) that psychologism is a mistaken and self-refuting view, and that Husserl is to be credited with having shown this to be so.

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(I will say something about Frege in a moment.) *Psychologism* seeks to explain how (H) became generally accepted amongst philosophers in the German-speaking lands and what role social-political circumstances played in the process. The argument unfolds in five steps.

Step one consists of a philosophical reconstruction of Husserl's and Frege's arguments. The aim is simply to work out as clearly as possible what Husserl's and Frege's arguments were; where their arguments were similar and where they differed. No sociology is used at this stage.

Step two describes the contemporary reception of Husserl's and Frege's arguments. (There was not much of a reception of Frege's arguments.) I show that, while many commentators between 1901 and 1914 praised Husserl's assault on psychologism, many others attacked him. The critics did not find Husserl's objections to psychologism original; they thought that his refutation of so-called 'psychologism' begged too many questions; they charged Husserl with misconstruing all, or parts, of psychologism; they reproached him for laying false charges against his colleagues; and they blamed him for having relapsed into psychologism himself.

Step three shows that Husserl was not alone. *Psychologism* samples about 200 philosophical texts published in Germany and Austria between 1866 and 1931 and finds that no fewer than 139 authors were attacked as psychologistic thinkers. I also show that psychologism had dozens and dozens of different subforms in different areas of philosophy, and that it was routinely linked to many other ills: anthropologism, biologism, Darwinism, empiricism, existentialism, historicism, irrationalism, logicism, materialism, naturalism, pessimism, positivism, Protestantism, relativism, skepticism, sensualism and subjectivism. Moreover, 'psychologism' was a term that different authors defined in different ways. Not all of these ways were compatible. The only common core was something like 'too much psychology where it does not belong'.

Step four provides a sociological explanation for the interest in refuting psychologism: the rise of experimental psychology within philosophy departments. According to the statistics of one contemporary witness, of the thirty-nine full professorships in philosophy in 1892, practitioners of experimental psychology held three; of the forty-two full professorships in 1900 they occupied six; while of the forty-four in 1913 they had already gained ten. Their share thus increased from 7.7% to an impressive 22.7 % within the short period of twenty-two years. Several of the first-generation experimental psychologists were – as the sociologists Joseph Ben-David and Randall Collins called them in 1966 – 'role hybrids'. That is, several of the first-generation experimental psychologists were physiologists by training and migrated into philosophy because of overcrowding in their home discipline.

Responding to this influx of physiologists, a substantive group of philosophers of all ilk – with the Neokantians leading the pack – aimed for what *Psychologism* calls 'role-purification': the 'pure philosophers' argued that the role of the philosopher and the role of the scientific psychologist needed to be and be kept apart. Note that the ideal of role-purification can also explain – in part anyway – why Frege was unable to get much of a hearing in the debate.

For many German pure philosophers, the dangers of 'logical mathematicism' (as Heinrich Rickert called it) were no less real than the dangers of psychologism. Rickert once applauded Frege's case against psychologism but immediately went on to say that the greatest threat to 'the independence of logic' came from 'a direction that one might call logical mathematicism.' (The debate over logical mathematicism has been investigated by Jarmo Pulkkinen 1994.)

Be this as it may, the conflict over the chairs for experimental philosophy culminated in a petition, put together by the pure philosophers and sent to all ministries of education, asking that experimental psychologists be expelled from philosophy departments.

Step five explains why the debate ended. First of all, World War One put an end to domestic philosophical strife. It also brought about a new division of labour: experimental psychologists were called upon to do applied work for the military, while pure philosophers eagerly adopted an ideological role: they gave hundreds of public speeches arguing for the superiority of the German idealistic spirit over French materialism and British psychologism.

After the war, the psychologists' applied work quickly found a place in technical universities. This removed the cause for worrying about the relationship between psychology and philosophy. Moreover, of the various movements and schools of the 1920s, the phenomenology of Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger best fitted the post-war German mentality in which *Lebensphilosophie* loomed much larger than naturalistic philosophy. This allowed phenomenologists to rewrite the pre-war debate as a triumph of Husserl over all the others. – *Exeunt omnes*.

3. Influences and models

Although my book was indebted to a wide range of authors and projects, two influences were paramount. The first was Klaus Christian Köhnke's brilliant book *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus* (1986). Köhnke argued convincingly that the history of philosophy could, or perhaps even should, be considered as a part of general history, and that the *Erkenntnisinteresse* of the history of philosophy should not be subordinated to systematic philosophy. To achieve such independence, Köhnke implied, the history of philosophy should be open to using sociological, social-psychological and statistical methods. At the same time, Köhnke insisted that the social history of philosophy was not simply a form of (Marxian) *Ideologiekritik*.

Consider, for instance, Köhnke's analysis of the 'practical turn' by the Neokantians in 1879. On 11 May and 2 June, two attempts on the life of the German emperor had been made. These actions moved German political opinion sharply against socialism and towards the right. There was a general feeling of acute crisis. Neokantian philosophers shared this sentiment and

it influenced their development of the movement: almost overnight, Kant's ethical writings became central to Neokantianism. And there was a new emphasis on 'idealism' as opposed to relativism, psychologism and empiricism.

Of course, and as already mentioned, the 'Strong Programme' in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (Bloor 1991) was a second key influence. SPK, as I envisaged it, should also be causal; impartial with respect to truth and falsity, rationality or irrationality, success or failure; symmetrical in its style of explanation; and reflexive. Remember also that the 'Strong Programme' is strong rather than weak because it is meant to apply to successful or true science as much as it does to unsuccessful or false science; not just to Aryan physics but also to quantum mechanics or the Einsteinian revolution; not just to Cardinal Bellarmine but also to Galileo. SSK is, moreover, a sociology primarily of scientific *content* and not of scientists.

These distinctions and aspirations also matter for SPK. In other words, back in 1995 and still today, I regard the following items as key desiderata for good work in SPK:

- It should be a sociology primarily of philosophical content, not of philosophers.
- It should focus on 'good' philosophy and on philosophically relevant cases.
- It should be symmetrical and impartial in its treatment of the material.
- And it should – wherever possible – be reflexive: its analyses should target cases that might explain why so many philosophers are hostile to naturalistic philosophy and social-political analysis of philosophical content.

3. Sociological alternatives: Collins and Gross

I now turn to a brief discussion of the two books that, as far as sociology of philosophy goes, have attracted most attention since the mid-1990s. Both were written by professional sociologists. (This marks a difference from me who was trained in philosophy and has held positions in philosophy for most of his academic life.) Of course, I could also here mention studies by authors who – while reluctant to sail under the flag of 'sociology' – do sociological analysis of philosophical developments in all but name (e.g. Reisch 2005). But given constraints of space, it seems best to confine myself to card-carrying sociologists of philosophy.

I begin with Randall Collins' monumental *Sociology of Philosophies* of 1998. Collins summarises the main theoretical tools of his study as follows: 'The social structure of the intellectual world … is an ongoing struggle among chains of persons, charged up with emotional energy and cultural capital, to fill a small number of centers of attention.' (1998: 14).

Collins claims to have discovered a 'Law of Small Numbers' according to which there are never more than six slots in the attention space of a given culture. Collins 1098-page book seeks to investigate all of philosophy in all traditions from this perspective. It is impossible to summarise his results in a few sentences. But two concerns are paramount at every turn: the fight over the six slots in the attention space, and a study of material conditions for philosophical work.

Only rarely does Collins offer explanations of philosophical content. One exception is his study of German Idealism (1998: 618-887). Here, he follows received wisdom in reporting that the French revolution and the German defeats in the Napoleonic wars triggered reforms of the universities. Moreover, philosophers argued for an equal standing of the philosophical faculties with the faculties of law and medicine. One central aspect of the philosophers' argument was to suggest that philosophy performs an important role vis-à-vis all the sciences: it either investigates the conditions of the possibility of knowledge in all fields; or it produces

philosophical encyclopaedias that organise the foundations of the sciences. Thus, German Idealism was at least in part brought about by the perceived need to justify the existence and special position of the philosophical faculty in the university.

Collins' book received a fair amount of attention in the first few years after its publication. Alas, the response amongst philosophers was overwhelmingly negative. And there really is every reason to be dissatisfied. For instance, the book is almost entirely based on secondary or tertiary sources. Collins never goes into the details of specific texts or oeuvres. Moreover, most of his analysis is concerned with listing who when and where made it into the six slots of the attention space. At the same time, the assignment of philosophical positions to slots seems quite arbitrary since Collins has no criterion for what all or little might be counted as a philosophical position.

In light of my desiderata for SPK, Collins does not fare too well either. While it is positive that he applies his analysis to both good and bad philosophy, and is symmetrical in his discussions, most of the time his is not a sociology of philosophical content. And when he turns to content – as in the case of German idealism – his comments are at too low a level of resolution to be convincing. There also is little to be found in terms of reflexivity. I therefore cannot find that Collins' work pushed the field of SPK into important new directions.

My second example of more recent works in the vicinity of SPK is Neil Gross' book on Rorty (Gross 2008). Gross' study is first and foremost a marvellously rich biography of Rorty and his fascinating parents. But in addition to providing a biography of Rorty, Gross also sets himself the task of developing an explanatory 'new sociology of ideas' (as he calls it). Accordingly he seeks to provide sociological answers to two questions about Rorty's intellectual history.

Question One: Why did Rorty shift from the pluralist, historical, pragmatist orientation that he adopted during his PhD at Yale (1952-56) to an analytic orientation in the late fifties and sixties? Gross thinks that to answer this question one can draw on ideas of Randall Collins

(and Pierre Bourdieu). The reply is that Rorty acted strategically: tenure-pressures, that is, expectations of the predominantly analytic colleagues at Princeton, motivated Rorty to shift to analytic philosophy himself. The timing of the shift – as the tenure decision moved closer – is telling.

Question Two: Why did Rorty shift from the analytic orientation back to a pluralist, historical, pragmatist stance in the seventies? Although here too strategic considerations 'were probably not irrelevant' (2008: 320), Gross suggests that they cannot sufficiently explain the shift. Enter the idea of the 'self-concept': from his parents, Rorty acquired the 'self-concept' of an 'American patriot': this self-concept came with the idea of being interested in broad cultural developments and patterns, interventions in political life and using resources of the American tradition. For Rorty it meant rediscovering the pragmatist tradition he had been familiar with since his days at Yale. Gross claims that Rorty 'acquired the identity from his parents, that it became reactivated in the 1970s in response to their deaths, the rise the New Left, and other historical developments, and that its effect was to renew Rorty's commitment to American pragmatism' (id.: 562).

Once more, taken as a conventional biography of a fascinating personality and his family background, Gross' book is impressive. But I am less convinced by it as an exercise in the sociology of philosophy. And this, after all, is the field to which Gross seeks to contribute. One difficulty here derives from Gross' focus on a single individual. Although we learn a fair amount of Rorty's social contexts at different times, Gross' sociological explanations have a strongly individualistic flavour. He seeks to explain the actions of an individual, his strategic moves and his self-concept. No attempt is made to portray Rorty as a member of a larger unit, be it a generation, be it a class or be it a professional group. Moreover, I find it hard to get very excited about the two explanations presented in such detail in Gross' book. It is of course a common phenomenon that young philosophers (and young scientists) try to secure an academic position by taking their lead from more senior colleagues. The same goes for Rorty's move

away from analytic philosophy. Too many of his broader cultural and political interests did not fit with analytic philosophy – as practiced in Princeton at the time –, and so Rorty went from Princeton to Virginia and published works addressing a broader public on a wide variety of subjects. So again, no real surprise here, and it is not obvious to me why Gross develops a whole theory of the self-concept in order to make Rorty's second move intelligible.   To return to my criteria, Gross' explanation of philosophical content does not go very deep. We only get an explanation of why one philosopher cared more about one kind of work rather than another. Because the analysis of content does not go far, it is hard to judge whether these explanations are directed at good or bad philosophy. And since we lack a comparison or controversy, symmetrical treatment of two sides does not come into view either.

In sum then, I find Gross' study too tame and cautious to be an interesting contribution to SPK.

4. Self-criticism

It is easy to criticise others; it is much harder to criticise oneself. Fortunately, the temporal distance makes it less painful. And thus I shall now take a critical perspective on *Psychologism*.

I have two major objections to my 1995 study, one historical, one philosophical. History first. I now think it was one-sided to structure the whole argument of the book around the reception of Husserl's and Frege's arguments. This meant that I paid too little attention to the emergence of psychologistic views and the authors whom Husserl and Frege targeted first and foremost: Theodor Lipps, Benno Erdmann, Franz Brentano, Christoph Sigwart, Wilhelm Wundt or Gerald Heymans. A comparison with other countries, especially France or Britain, would also have been interesting.

Psychologism also has a glaring philosophical shortcoming: it does not clarify sufficiently what it is trying to do, and what its philosophical implications are supposed to be. To make matters worse, *Psychologism* used the phrase 'sociological deconstruction of a philosophical fact' as the main slogan for its investigation. But this is obscure: it suggests some

kind of combination of Derrida with the sociology of knowledge. It also invites the thought that I meant to be engaged in 'debunking', 'undoing of a fact' or 'explaining away of arguments'. And this gestures in the direction of the very glib sociological reduction – of arguments to power – that in fact I was so eager to avoid. The slogan also hints into the direction of a crude consensus theory of facts and truth. In sum, the glaring philosophical shortcoming was a lack of clarity on how SPK relates to systematic philosophy.

Fortunately, there are also some positive elements. *Psychologism* does not do too badly in terms of the four desiderata for SPK. It is causal, impartial and symmetrical in its explanations. It covers an important juncture in 20th-century philosophy. And the case did not appear as an easy target for SPK when I started. The case is also reflexively interesting: it investigates a period in which philosophers forged arguments against natural-scientific and social-scientific 'intrusions' into philosophy, and some of the criticism of the sociology of philosophy today are but unconscious rehashes of the old arguments against psychologism.

5. Philosophical relevance

In this section, I shall try to address some of the mentioned shortcomings of my 1995 book. I shall ask how case studies in SPK relate to relativism, cynicism, skepticsm, Kuhn, and the virtue of epistemic humility.

I will begin with the relationship between SPK and epistemic relativism. By 'epistemic relativism' I here mean, very roughly, the view that there are different systems of epistemic justification and that these cannot be ranked in a neutral way. The relationship between SPK and such relativism can be looked at from two angles: Does SPK *presuppose* relativism, and/or does SPK *lend direct or indirect support* to it? I will begin with the first question.

In order to keep the first question in focus, it is important to restrict it in the following way: Does the 'strong programme' of SSK or SPK presuppose epistemic relativism? In restricting the question in this way, I leave aside that both Bloor and myself have – at various times – advocated and defended versions of epistemic relativism. Narrowed down in this way,

SPK does not *presuppose* epistemic relativism. Impartiality – i.e. the methodological suspension of evaluation – is not by itself a relativistic move. The same is true of the symmetry assumption. Correctly understood, it boils down to the claim that both true and false beliefs have social aspects: they may be handed on in traditions, be backed up by authorities, be taught as the truth, and so on.

Does SPK *lend support* to epistemic relativism? Does it not show that people with different constellations of interests and arguments produce different systems of belief? And does it not abstain from assessing these systems as to their merits? The answer is 'yes' – but that is just because it is not the role of SPK to evaluate arguments. SPK does not claim that to evaluate arguments is futile or uninteresting. And thus, in my view, there is no implication from SPK into the direction of relativism.

Hans-Johann Glock disagrees. In a 2008 paper, he introduces the category 'historical relativism' and subsumes *Psychologism* under it. I do not know the full range of positions Glock wishes to capture under this label. One central consequence of the view is, however, that 'there are no "timeless" philosophical problems and that philosophical ideas can have validity at best relative to a specific historical context' (2008: 873).

Contrary to what Glock's text implies, *Psychologism* does not say anything for or against the idea of timeless philosophical problems. Indeed one might think of the question how logic relates to psychology as a timeless philosophical problem, and still find *Psychologism* interesting insofar as it lays out how that timeless problem was discussed in the specific conditions of late 19th and early 20th-century philosophy. My book also did not say anything about whether a philosophical idea can have validity in only one or several, or even many, historical contexts.

And thus, on behalf of my former self I plead 'not guilty' to Glock's charge. (Nevertheless, and returning to my present self, I now cheerfully plead 'guilty' to finding the idea of timeless philosophical problems quite obscure in itself. But that is a topic for another

occasion. Anyway, it seems to me that the question of timeless problems and timeless validity is orthogonal to SPK.)

Nevertheless, even if SPK does not support relativism, does it not invite cynicism or skepticism with respect to philosophy? Does it not suggest that philosophical arguments are just smokescreens for political or institutional interests? Does it not lead to the thought that philosophers are, as one critic memorably put it, 'malicious hypocrites or stupid dopes'?[1]

Admittedly, my talk of the 'sociological deconstruction of philosophical facts' could be heard that way. And yet, on a closer reading of *Psychologism*, it seems to me to suggest nothing of the sort. For instance, it does not show that, say, Husserl's arguments against psychologism were 'nothing but' cynical moves to push experimental psychologists out of philosophy departments. *Psychologism* provides the *context* for these arguments and explains why they seemed so important to so many philosophers. But the book does not, not even in one sentence, present Husserl as a hypocrite or dope. Husserl wanted psychologists out of philosophy departments *and* he thought there were very good reasons for a sharp separation of logic from psychology. It is not that he thought the latter only because of the former. Maybe his dislike of role hybrids, like Wundt, raised his prior probability for the proposition that there is something wrong with psychological interpretations of logic. This seems likely to me, but it is difficult to show. Moreover, and more generally, it is an open question – a question presumably for social epistemology – whether decades-long intensive and charged controversies (like the psychologism dispute) might not be beneficial for philosophical progress in various dimensions. There is no denying that arguments assembled during the controversy came to be – as time went by – of greater and greater sophistications.

And yet, I imagine you asking, surely *some* philosophers found Husserl persuasive because of their vested interest. And what about all those philosophers who rushed to their

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[1] The critic is Jorge Gracia (1992: 207).

pulpits to defend the superiority of the German spirit between 1914 and 1918? Or the way everyone suddenly discovered his *Lebensphilosophie* after 1918?

Alright, I admit it: by my lights, some 'pure' German philosophers *were* hypocrites; some were manipulative; and some even were stupid. But this is as we would expect things to be in any social group. And it is not the perspective of SPK that falsely and unfairly makes things appear in this light. I am also happy to add the suspicion that biases played a role in the controversy: I am thinking of well-known cognitive and social biases like the confirmation bias, the bandwagon effect, the status quo bias, the herd instinct, and a *déformation professionnelle*. Am I abandoning neutrality and symmetry in making these judgements? Not necessarily. After all, I see these biases playing a role on both sides of the debate over psychologism.

One might also try to respond to a sociological case study, like *Psychologism*, in a different was. (It is roughly modelled on Kuhn's one-time response to criticism of his model of normal science, followed by a scientific revolution, followed by a new form normal science (Kuhn 2000).) According to this response, the arguments Frege and Husserl presented against psychologism are amongst the very best philosophy can produce. 'Nowadays only a few cranks officially subscribe to that view …. There is progress in philosophy after all!' (Musgrave 1972: 606). And if this insight and decisive progress is produced by the mixed motives and political constellations described in *Psychologism*, then so be it. Social factors cannot be all truth-preventing; perhaps we should accept that they can be *truth-enabling*.

Maybe, further investigation can make something plausible out of this consideration, but, as it stands, it seems to me more convincing in Kuhn's case than in mine. One reason for this is that Kuhn covers a lot more of the history of science than I cover in the history of philosophy. Moreover, only cranks still challenge Einstein or Planck, but – contrary to Musgrave's assessment in 1972 – there are psychologistic logicians today, and several

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compelling challenges to Husserl's and Frege's arguments (see e.g. Kusch 1995, Chapter One for details).

Up to this point, I have tried to argue that SPK does not support relativism, skepticism or a Kuhnian response. In conclusion, I want to offer something a little more constructive and positive. This brings me to my last topic, contingency and humility. Here are some lessons to be drawn from my case study: ideas and disputes that belong only to the ivory tower can influence, and be influenced by, political ideas and events outside. Events outside the ivory tower can trigger and terminate philosophical debates, and influence those who emerge as the winners and losers. The history of philosophy is (sometimes?, often?) (re-)written by those who, for contingent reasons, emerge as the winners. The outcomes of philosophical debates are determined by sets of reasons, not all of which, at first sight, seem to us to be relevant.

What follows from taking this contingency seriously? It seems to me that it suggests a form of philosophical *humility*. I mean a form of humility that is grounded in the realisation that the experienced obviousness or intuitiveness of one's current position is the product of contingent social arrangements and struggles that easily could have tipped the other way. And if they had tipped the other way, we would probably consider different positions evident and intuitive. Taking this insight seriously need not lead us to abandon judgement, but perhaps it can make us judge with less confidence that we, and we alone, got it right.

6. Conclusions

What then is the SPK answer to the question 'What does philosophy owe to its history'? Trying to answer this question provides me with an opportunity to draw together different strands of my paper.

To begin with, it might seem that SPK is tied to a much narrower understanding of the history of philosophy than what the above-stated question suggests: one might think that SPK only focuses on *social-political* history, not on history *per se*. I reject this narrow understanding

of SPK. To do a proper case study in SPK, one needs to use the methods of many different subfields of history. After all, one cannot tell in advance which specific elements of the social world – economic relations, party politics, religious communities, institutions, concepts or ideas, etc. – will be crucial for understanding a specific turn in the history of philosophy. A social-political history of philosophy is thus a comprehensive, not a selective, study of the philosophical past.

What does philosophy today owe to *its* past – both *within* and *outside of* the discipline of philosophy? I cannot see how the answer could be anything but the following: philosophy owes to its past its current character, its taken-for-granted assumptions and intuitions; the body of theoretical beliefs it successively transforms; its methods and its institutional embedding. Or to return to *Psychologism*: if my argument is anywhere near the mark, then the specific social-political events in and around German academia between 1870 and 1920 were influential in shaping the whole discipline's conception of the relationship between philosophy and the empirical sciences. This conception influenced work in all subfields of philosophy, and it legitimised a wide range of institutional borderlines and limits. And many of these theoretical and institutional borderlines were still important decades after the end of World War One, and way beyond the German-speaking world.

If all this is roughly true, then any form of philosophy which includes a self-reflective element – a reflection on its own conditions of possibility – must welcome and encourage work in SPK. SPK offers philosophers an account of what they owe to their history (qua *res gestae*); SPK provides a comprehensive '*narratio rerum gestorum*'. And this is not all: the lessons of SPK are not just historical lessons. At least some of the implications go beyond specific times and places. SPK also suggests systematic ideas about the ways in which philosophical knowledge is often intertwined with social, institutional or political developments. The short- and long-term success of a particular philosophical position is frequently dependent on its proponents' skills in enrolling powerful interests. This is not to deny that philosophical

arguments also aim to be 'pure', general or context-independent. But SPK is uniquely situated to teach us the healthy suspicion that purity and politics are often two sides of the same coin. There is this much philosophy of (philosophical) history even in SPK.[2]

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