

Philosophy and Its History
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Philosophy, perhaps more than any other discipline, is fascinated by its own history. Introductory philosophy courses for undergraduates often focus on great works from the distant past by authors such as Plato and Descartes. Conferences, journals, and graduate seminars are devoted to the discussion of the history of philosophy. Philosophy departments normally include specialists on the history of philosophy. Philosophers conducting cutting edge research often take the trouble to situate their work with respect to long dead predecessors.

In all of these respects, philosophy is vastly different from, for example, physics. Undergraduates are not taught physics by reading and discussing the works of Archimedes or Newton. (Of course, students are taught Newtonian mechanics, but they don't read and discuss the *Principia* in the way that philosophy students might study the *Republic* or the *Meditations*.) Conferences, journals and graduate seminars on the history of physics abound. But they are not normally considered part of the disciplinary activity of physics itself.

Of course, disciplines, like academic departments, are not natural kinds and their organization is, to some extent, conventional. Disciplinary boundaries are thus contingent and reflect, at least to some degree, accidents of history. But they are not, for all that, entirely arbitrary. Disciplines tend to group together subject matters that are interestingly similar and academic departments often house teachers and researchers whose work bears tighter connection to each other's than to that of their cross-campus colleagues.

It is striking that philosophy as a discipline takes ownership of the study of its history in a way that physics, for example, does not. Physicists conducting cutting edge research rarely take the trouble to situate their work with respect to their great predecessors from the distant past. They do not teach and study their works. And the physicists do not appear to be, in this regard, unusual. I have just checked the undergraduate teaching schedules for several leading departments of economics, mathematics, and psychology.¹

¹ The departments were the economics departments of Chicago, MIT, Berkeley, and Harvard; the psychology departments of Harvard, Stanford, and Berkeley; and the mathematics departments of Princeton, Harvard, and the University of Michigan for the Spring semester of 2010. This list is

None of them are offering a single course on the history of their discipline. Most philosophy departments, by contrast, are offering multiple courses on this history of philosophy. None of these departments of mathematics, psychology, or economics, with one exception, employ researchers who specialize in the history of their disciplines. (The one exception is an economics department that lists a faculty member who specializes on the history and, interestingly enough, the philosophy of economics.) Why is philosophy so different from other disciplines in regard to its relationship to its history?

I believe that reflecting on the answer to this question can help illuminate the issue of method in the history of philosophy. There is debate among historians of philosophy about the sorts of things that are important in the study of the history of philosophy---the sorts of questions and issues that should be emphasized and the sorts of benefits we should expect to receive from the study of the history of philosophy. The debate about method is ultimately a debate about value. How one studies the history of philosophy depends on what benefits one thinks that study of the history of philosophy promises. Different methods will be better and worse suited to the realization of different values. One way of describing the distinctive relation that philosophy has to its history is to say that philosophy values its history more than other disciplines. We have seen that it does so value its history. We have yet to address the question of why it does so. Sorting out the debate among historians of philosophy about what is valuable about the study of history will help explain, one might hope, why philosophy values its history more than do other disciplines. Once we figure out what it is that can be gained from the study of the history of philosophy, we should be able to understand why so many philosophers take it seriously. The ability of one account of the value of history to explain this better than another might be one criterion that we can use to adjudicate this debate about method.

In his important and influential paper “Does History Have a Future?,” Daniel Garber describes a method for the history of philosophy that he calls “disinterested historical reconstruction.” Garber presents disinterested historical reconstruction first of all by way of contrast to an alternative method of which Garber takes the work of Jonathan Bennett to be exemplary. Garber characterizes Bennett’s method in terms of the values that it seeks to realize:

[H]istory is important [according to Bennett] because studying historical figures can teach us philosophy; in the history of philosophy we have a storehouse of arguments and positions worth taking seriously as philosophy, worth discussing and debating in the same way the work of a very good contemporary philosopher is

somewhat arbitrary but no similarly arbitrary list of philosophy departments would yield even somewhat similar results.

worth discussing and debating.

Bennett, Garber notes, is motivated to study the history of philosophy by a desire for philosophical truth. We want to learn philosophy from the great philosophers of the past. We want their help in discovering philosophical truth. We can learn philosophy from historical figures in much the same way that we can learn philosophy from any intelligent philosopher: by considering their views and evaluating their arguments. In essence, on this view, what we do when we study a historical figure is little different from what we do with our philosophical colleagues. We argue and discuss philosophy with them. This being so, when we reconstruct a historical figure's arguments, we should attend to the plausibility of its premises, the strength of its inferences and plausibility of its conclusion. If appropriate we can suggest emendations that would strengthen the argument. These are the sort of standard things that take place in a conversation that is geared toward the solution of a philosophical problem.

It is important to Bennett's conception of the history of philosophy that the historical figure who provides the object of our study need not be right in order to teach us. If it were then, one might argue, there is precious little philosophy to be learned from historical figures. After all, not many theories from the history of philosophy are uncontroversially correct. But, on Bennett's view, historical figures need not be right to teach us. Indeed, more often, we can learn from the mistakes made in the course of the arguments of such figures. Bennett compares studying the impressive failures of our philosophical ancestors to observing a mechanical genius try to build an automobile engine out of a Meccano set. We won't get a working engine but, Bennett claims, we may very well learn a great deal about engineering.

Garber agrees that we can, at least sometimes, learn philosophy from historical figures. But if we think that the only legitimate motivation for the study of the history of philosophy is philosophical truth then, Garber reminds us, we must be prepared to reach some clear-eyed unsentimental conclusions about the history of philosophy. If philosophical truth is the only motivation for studying the history of philosophy, he claims, then much of that history will turn out to be marginal. It is true that many today turn to Aristotle, Thomas, Kant or Marx for philosophical truth, but, he asks, how many study Descartes, Spinoza, or Leibniz for this reason?

Perhaps we can learn philosophy from Descartes and Leibniz, for example, by learning from their failures. It is possible, Garber allows, to learn from failures, but a little, he insists, can go a long way. An architecture student may learn a lot from studying a failed building or two, but the bulk of her studies will surely be devoted to studying successful buildings and the principles behind them. The engineers who design automobile engines

would be well advised not to spend too much time watching mechanical geniuses trying and failing to build engines out of Meccano sets. Their time would be better spent elsewhere. Specifically, they should be studying the state of the art of engineering, learning the most up to date principles and techniques. The same goes for physics and psychology. We don't learn much physics by studying phlogiston theory nor much psychology by studying phrenology. Why should philosophy be any different? In the end, Garber suggests, if what one wants is philosophical truth, then only a small portion of one's philosophical education should be spent studying the heroic failures of the past. The bulk of one's efforts should be spent studying positions and arguments that remain live candidates for truth.

Returning to our original question, if Garber is right, then the desire for philosophical truth cannot justify the vast amount of resources that the discipline of philosophy devotes to the study of its history. If Bennett is correct about what is valuable about the history of philosophy, then the history of philosophy should have only a marginal role in the practice of philosophy.

Not only may the history of philosophy provide arid soil for the cultivation of the kind of value that Bennett seeks, but the focus on philosophical truth, Garber warns, can distort our historical understanding of a figure. It can lead us to focus on the parts of that figure's work that speaks to our own interests and concerns and lead us to neglect even those areas of a figure's oeuvre that she herself regarded as most important. Of course, this need not be such a bad thing. The enduring value of a thinker's work need not stem from the part that was most valuable to that thinker. For example, Newton might have viewed his work on the literal interpretation of the Bible and on alchemy as rivaling in importance his work on mechanics. But it seems to me that the contemporary historian of science is under no obligation to follow Newton on this matter. The historian who focuses on Newton's mechanics, optics, or mathematics to the exclusion of his work on Bible interpretation or alchemy does not, in virtue of this, betray a distorted understanding of the man. No doubt, the question of Newton's own self-understanding and the overall character of his life and work are interesting and important questions. Inquiry guided by those questions will no doubt lead us to focus more on his theory of Bible interpretation or alchemy than inquiries with other focuses. Such questions are distinct from the question of what we can learn from him about, for example, celestial mechanics and the scientific method. That is an interesting and important question too. It should be uncontroversial that, in a healthy intellectual culture, both kinds of ought to be taken seriously, although obviously not every researcher can consider every question.

Perhaps a more serious problem is that the focus on philosophical truth can lead us to distort the philosophical content of a thinker's work by forcing it to conform to our own

philosophical sensibilities, irrespective of whether or not the thinker under interpretation would have found the resulting interpretation congenial or even intelligible. Garber writes:

[I]f our goal is philosophical truth, then historical veracity can have only an instrumental value at best; it is of value only insofar as it helps us attain our principal goal. The point of interpretation, on this view, is to make the philosophy breathe, to make it available to us, and historical veracity is important only insofar as it serves this end.

The implication is clear. If historical veracity is only instrumentally valuable, then it is only contingently so. Historical *misrepresentation* might also, on occasion, lead to philosophical truth. This being so, historical misrepresentation would be among the techniques available to the researcher motivated by the search of philosophical truth.

But I think that Garber's worry here isn't very well motivated. It is very rare for a philosopher to be concerned with historical veracity for only instrumental reasons even if she is motivated in the first instance by a desire for philosophical truth. But this need not mean that she also has historical truth as a goal. When the goal is truth, philosophical or otherwise, there are permissible and impermissible paths to it. We want the truth but we also want to come by it the right way. If wild conjecture, counterinduction, or accident sometimes yield truth, our inquiry will still not have been successful if we obtained truth via these methods. It seems to me that when discussing the views of someone else, accurately representing those views is an intellectual duty no matter what values one is pursuing. This goes for the views of historical figures just as much as for one's contemporaries. It might not be my aim to understand another philosopher's views from his own perspective---to get inside her head so to speak---but I'm always obliged to accurately represent her. Historical accuracy, like accuracy more generally, is an intellectual duty and not merely an instrumental good. For this reason, I do not share Garber's worry that if the desire for philosophical truth is not tempered by a desire for historical truth, then history of philosophy is put at risk for misrepresentation. One's intellectual duties, the duty to accurately represent the views of one's interlocutors among them, are not always conditional upon the aims of one's inquiry.

Garber also worries that the pursuit of philosophical truth can introduce distortions of historical understanding by tempting the interpreter to attempt to explicate a thinker's ideas in terms that, while congenial to our contemporary sensibilities, do not accurately represent the actual ideas of the thinker. Such attempts to translate into a more contemporary framework is sometimes called "rational reconstruction."

Garber is not entirely explicit about why he thinks that the attempt to explicate a

philosopher's theory in terms alien to the thinker's own puts the interpreter at risk of misinterpretation. After all, every act of interpretation involves taking ideas expressed in one set of terms and translating them into others. That is just what interpretation is. But perhaps what worries Garber is that if the vocabulary of the interpretation is sufficiently alien to the target of the interpretation, it is unlikely that the interpretation actually expresses the intentions of the target.

There is perhaps some merit to this worry, but one of the examples that Garber gives to illustrate the method of rational reconstruction raises further questions. He cites Benson Mates' work on Leibniz's conception of possible worlds where Mates formalizes certain aspects of Leibniz's philosophy within a system very different from any system in which Leibniz might have worked.

In general, it's hard to see anything wrong with that. If, for example, a historical figure's argument contains scopal ambiguity and translating her argument into first-order logic reveals the ambiguity, this fact seems to be of undeniable interest, even if the figure in question was ignorant of first-order logic. Pointing out this fact runs no risk of historical distortion. No doubt an Abelard or a Leibniz would be unable to grasp the point without a little tutoring (but not much probably!), and yet that doesn't mean that the observation introduces historical misrepresentation. It is true and historically accurate to say of our imagined example that the text as written by the historical figure contains a scopal ambiguity. Nothing has been misrepresented by revealing this. What is more, if we look at how Mates himself presents his project, it doesn't raise concerns of this nature. Here is Mates describing his project:

When defining logical truth in terms of interpretations or models, logicians frequently make reference to the Leibnizian idea that a proposition is a necessary truth if and only if it is true of all possible worlds. The same idea is usually mentioned in discussions of the semantics of modal logics. As soon as one looks a bit further into the matter, however, it becomes apparent that the concepts of 'possible world' employed by modern investigators are quite different from that of Leibniz himself; and although perhaps this is all to the good, there maybe some interest in considering what the effect would be if a more strictly Leibnizian approach were followed. [...] It also should be mentioned at the outset that clearly the formalized language toward which Leibniz was moving would be been more like that of Lesniewski than like the Feysian system employed by most logicians today, and inevitably a certain amount of distortion is involved in attempting to apply his ideas to a type of language he never considered. Nevertheless I believe

that such application is not without interest.²

Mates' interest here is how the incorporation of certain features Leibniz's conception of a possible world would affect modern model-theoretic approaches to modal logic. Certainly such questions are not out of bounds. And asking them does not invite historical misunderstandings. Mates allows that in applying Leibniz's ideas to a formalized language that Leibniz never considered involves some inevitable distortion. But Mates is not saying that formalizing a thinker's informal writings in a formal system of which he was ignorant inevitably involves distortions. If the expressive power of the formal system is at least equal to the expressive power of the natural language in which the original text was written, then no distortions are inevitable. What Mates is talking about is applying some of Leibniz's *ideas about logic* to a logical system very different from the one that he had in mind or was working toward. In this case, the application will not always be perfectly smooth without some distortion or adjustment of the ideas. But such distortions are not a species of misunderstanding. Indeed, noting where such distortions are necessary in order to apply Leibniz's ideas to a particular formal language *promotes* understanding. We understand Leibniz much better if we are aware of what modifications or adjustments to his ideas are need to apply his ideas to a particular language. Of course, Garber might legitimately worry that the same method of rational reconstruction could prove disastrous in the hands of a philosopher less scrupulous and attentive to these issues than Mates. But there is no method that does not result in misunderstanding if applied in a careless or irresponsible way. No method is foolproof.

Having characterized and introduced several worries about Bennett's method of doing the history of philosophy, Garber proceeds to offer a characterization of his own preferred method, which he calls "disinterested historical reconstruction." Taking Spinoza as an example, Garber urges us to:

attempt to understand Spinoza's positions and arguments in terms that he or a well-informed contemporary of his may have understood. It involves coming to understand that Spinoza or a contemporary of his would have considered unproblematic background beliefs, what they would have had trouble with, and in the light of that and other similar contexts, coming to understand what Spinoza's conception of his project was, how he thought he had established the conclusions he had reached, and what he thought was important about those conclusions, all under the assumption that, by and large, Spinoza's project is the work of a smart person working within a particular historical context.

² Benson Mates, "Leibniz on Possible Worlds," *Critical Assessments*, pp. 208-209.

How is this method different from the one preferred by Bennett? After all, if Bennett didn't think that Spinoza was an excellent philosopher and that therefore there was much to learn from him, he wouldn't bother to study him. This being so, we are much more likely to learn philosophy from Spinoza if we take the trouble to get him right, that is, to understand his ideas as he understood them. The main point of disagreement that Garber sees between himself and Bennett is that Bennett, in seeking to learn philosophical truth from Spinoza, spends a lot of effort in assessing the truth of Spinoza's doctrines and the acceptability of the arguments for them. This assessment takes place from Bennett's own perspective as a late twentieth century philosopher. Garber is less interested in what appears true or false from our own perspective. He is interested in what would have appeared reasonable to Spinoza given his historical context.

There is at least one respect in which it is uncontroversial that reasonability is relative to a historical context. What is reasonable for a thinker to believe depends at least partially upon her current belief set. Her current belief set is part of her historical context. So what is reasonable for her to believe is, to that extent, relative to her historical context. This is, of course, not what most people mean when they speak of "historical context." What is meant is the wider intellectual, cultural, and material environment. Is reasonability relative to that? Garber suggests that it is. In the above cited passage he says that assessing reasonability involves identifying claims that a thinker's contemporaries would have regarded as unproblematic background beliefs. The idea is, presumably, that if one's contemporaries believe that some proposition is unproblematic then it is reasonable to believe that proposition. This is controversial. One might object, for example, that pervasive irrationality is still irrationality and agreeing with it is not reasonable. But certainly that a belief is widespread can help *explain* why someone believes it. Noting that a belief was widespread during a philosopher's era can help forestall wild goose chases for other kinds of explanation. So investigation of historical context can contribute in this way to making intelligible that a certain thinker held some doctrine.

Of course, Bennett acknowledges that insight can be gained by familiarity with historical context. But he also notes that there is a diminishing marginal return on it and the finite attention of a philosophical researcher might well be better spent in direct contact with the historical figure's own texts. He suggests that just a fair grasp of the historical context is often sufficient.

I think that all parties to the debate would have to concede that there are no hard and fast rules about the correct ratio of the study of context to the study of the texts themselves. And, presumably, different ratios will conduce to different insights. The rational reconstructor and the historical reconstructor may well, Garber concedes, both arrive at the same ratio. What will differ in the end is the lack of concern for truth on the part of

the practitioner of historical reconstruction.

At this point, I'd like to raise some questions about Garber's idea that we can assess a doctrine's reasonability without attempting to assess its truth. This maybe so, but assessing truth and assessing reasonability are not always, in practice, independent matters. Assessing a philosophical doctrine for truth is often part of an effective procedure for making it intelligible or showing how it was reasonable by a thinker's own lights. Suppose that the target of historical interpretation believes that p. The question that ultimately interests the disinterested historian is, why did the target believe that p? Or alternatively, why was the target reasonable in believing that p? You might begin to try to answer this question by first asking yourself if you believe that p. If you do, then why? Would the grounds for your belief be available to the target? If you don't believe that p, then why not? Which of your background beliefs could you alter so that p became reasonable? And so forth. By working backwards from what is reasonable by the lights of the historian one can arrive at what would be reasonable by the lights of the historical figure being interpreted. Such a procedure does not uniquely determine an interpretation. It serves, however, to set us off on the right track or, at the very least, to give us some starting points from which to work. Of course, this procedure will be more effective the closer our beliefs are to the beliefs of the target of interpretation. But it should come as no surprise to anyone that it is easier to interpret a thinker who is more like us than someone who is less like us.

If our inquiry is not guided by assessment of truth, as Garber's ideal of disinterested historical reconstruction is not, what alternative methods are there? I think Garber's emphasis on historical context provides some indication of a possible answer. In our search for the basis of the reasonability of the doctrines of a philosopher we might attempt to immerse ourselves deeply enough in the thinker's historical context that we acquire the ability to see the world from the perspective a philosophical well-informed contemporary. Once we acquire this ability, judgments of what is reasonable and what is not from within that historical context will become like second nature to us.

At one point in his essay, Garber compares the anthropologist in the field to the historian of philosophy. And although Garber doesn't make this point explicitly, perhaps the field anthropologist exemplifies this approach in a particularly pure form. The anthropologist completely immerses herself in the culture that she studies. She lives among the members of that culture and participates in their way of life. Over time, familiarity is achieved and, with familiarity, insight.

Obviously the historian of philosophy is at a distinct disadvantage compared to the anthropologist. The historian cannot literally participate in the life of the culture that she

studies. But it is not unreasonable to suppose that immersion in the materials that are available to the contemporary historian---the texts, art, artifacts and the like---can help the historian achieve the kind of familiarity sought by the anthropologist. Once she is suitably familiar with the context, reliable judgments of reasonability can be made.

Previously we noted that starting from judgments of truth or reasonability by the lights to the historian becomes less effective the greater the gulf separating the perspective of the historian from the perspective of the target of interpretation. The method of immersion in historical context also faces limitations. Immersion is a time consuming processes. This is exacerbated by the fact that it is difficult to fine tune immersion so that particular issues are targeted. When dealing with historical figures the opportunities for immersion are much poorer than those open to, for example, the anthropologist in the field and the degree of familiarity sought is, in the normal case, an imperfectly realized ideal. It is also difficult to practice historical immersion and philosophical reflection from one's own point of view simultaneously.

What is there to choose between the methods of assessing reasonability discussed do far: the method of assessing reasonability by working backwards from assessments of truth and the method of immersion in historical context? They each have strengths and weaknesses. I believe all parties would have to admit that both methods can be effective. Their relative effectiveness will depend on a host of factors. The intellectual disposition of the historian. The kinds of doctrines under consideration. The forms of reasonability being assessed. Perhaps the only judicious conclusion to be drawn is that the enterprise of the history of philosophy is well served if both approaches are employed. No single method, it is reasonable to think, is equal to the task of rendering intelligible the entire history of philosophy. It does, however, bear repeating that the method that involves assessing for truth is useful even if the primary goal pursued by the historian isn't philosophic truth but rather historical insight instead.

As discussed above, Garber characterizes his method in contrast to Bennett's in terms the values pursued. Bennett seeks philosophical truth whereas Garber seeks to show how a thinker's views were reasonable given her historical context. Understanding why a thinker's views were reasonable given her historical context is a historical goal; it is a form of historical understanding. The historian of philosophy who has such understanding as her ultimate goal is arguably more a historian than a philosopher. But showing that a thinker's views were reasonable given her historical context isn't the ultimate goal for Garber. He thinks that it has specifically philosophical benefits as well. To make this point, he discusses the view articulated by Descartes that reading the work of long dead authors is intellectually beneficial in much the same way that travel is. Garber writes:

By traveling we can get a certain perspective on our lives and the way we lead them, the things we do and things we believe. We go to other countries, learn their languages, observe their customs, eat their foods (or, at least, observe the kinds of foods they eat), discuss their beliefs about the world. This, Descartes thinks, can give us a certain perspective on our own lives. It can, among other things, free us of the beliefs about the world. It can, among other things, free us of the belief that the way we see things is the way things have to be, that X is fit for human consumption but Y is not, that weeks must have seven days, that children must be raised by their own parents, etc. Descartes' point is not relativistic here; he would be among the last to say that anything goes. Even though we observe others eating a certain food we do not, we may still shun it and continue to hold the belief that it is unhealthy or improper for us to eat. Seeing what others do may at least get us to raise the question for ourselves *why* we have the beliefs and customs that we do and, perhaps, lead us to see what is arbitrary and what is well grounded in our beliefs and behavior. (22)

In reading the work of historical figures we expose ourselves to very different perspectives and presuppositions. We broaden our horizons and gain perspective on our own views. The philosopher who reads none of the greats from the philosophical past is like the parochial person who has never traveled outside of her own region. Just as she is liable to have an overly narrow and provincial perspective on the world and is less likely to question the way of life of the people who surround her, so too will the philosopher who reads no history of philosophy be liable to a narrow and provincial perspective on philosophy.

This is a very deep and important insight into one way that reading history can be valuable. I have no doubt that studying the history of philosophy has just the sorts of benefits that Garber describes and that those benefits are important and valuable. And yet I find it somewhat dissatisfying as an account of why the history of philosophy is important to philosophy. Recall that we began this discussion by observing that philosophy has a very unusual relationship to its history in that studying the history of philosophy appears to be regarded by many philosophers as important to doing philosophy. The intellectual benefits of studying history that Garber describes seem to be benefits that any area of inquiry could receive from studying its own history. Physicists could obtain historical perspective on their own beliefs by studying phlogiston theory or the Aristotelian theory of the elements. Psychologists could gain perspective by studying phrenology or behaviorism. Why should philosophers value having their horizon's broadened through the study of history anymore than researchers in any other discipline?

I think both Bennett and Garber make an unwarranted assumption about philosophy and its history that color their views on method. I shall argue below that challenging this

assumption can shed light on the special relationship between philosophy and its history. Bennett thinks we can learn philosophy from studying its history but that we are just as likely (if not more likely) to learn from the mistakes of historical figures than their successes. Garber justifiably points out that there is a limit to how much we can learn from mistakes and suggests that we do not directly learn philosophy from studying its history. Rather we gain a new perspective on our own philosophical practices and assumptions by exposing ourselves to unfamiliar ideas. The assumption that Bennett and Garber both appear to make is that philosophy is making relatively rapid progress. The philosophical present has superseded its past rendering it obsolete as a direct source of philosophical knowledge. This confidence in the progress that philosophy is making leads Bennett to emphasize the ways that we can learn from the mistakes of the past and Garber to emphasize the indirect philosophical benefits of studying the history of philosophy.

This assumption does not bear scrutiny. Philosophy has not made rapid progress. There is no large body of established philosophical fact. The ideas of historical figures have not been, by and large, definitively refuted. I do not deny that philosophy has made some progress over the course of its long history. No doubt standards of rigor and argumentation have risen. Innovations in logic, decision theory and other technical disciplines have allowed us to pose questions and evaluate answers to them with greater and greater precision. But even a cursory comparison to, for example, the natural sciences reveals that, in substantive matters, philosophy has been making progress at a painfully slow rate. What important philosophical doctrine has been definitely refuted? Perhaps one might be tempted to cite mind-body dualism, the description theory of names, or Leibniz's theory of monads, but these doctrines are merely unfashionable; they have not been refuted. (Indeed, some of them appear to be on the brink of a revival.) Perhaps some doctrines have been refuted but that does not undermine my point. It is rare that an important philosophical position has been definitely refuted.

It is sometimes said that philosophy fails to make progress almost by definition. As soon as an area of philosophical inquiry starts to make progress, it branches off from philosophy and becomes an autonomous discipline. Undoubtedly this is historically true. At one time, all rational inquiry was labeled "philosophy." Great philosophers such as Aristotle and Descartes studied physics, biology, psychology and more. But once those subjects started to progress they ceased to be part of philosophy. But this process is, I conjecture, more or less over and narrower conception of philosophy has emerged as a discipline concerned with foundational issues. Logic has made considerable progress in the recent past but remains a central part of philosophy. Physics continues to make progress but foundational and interpretational issues are generally left to the philosophers. Genuine progress in, for example, the interpretation of quantum mechanics would not strip it of its philosophical status. The lack of progress made by philosophy is not part of the definition of philosophy.

It reflects, I would suggest, the comparative difficulty of the kinds of foundational questions characteristic of philosophy.

What does this have to do with the special relationship between philosophy and its history? It means that, given the rate of progress in philosophy, the time scale relevant to philosophical progress is massively longer than the time scale relevant to progress in, for example, the natural sciences. Philosophical time passes slowly. In fact, it passes so slowly that, from the perspective of philosophical time, even our ancient predecessors like Plato and Aristotle are near contemporaries of ours. For this reason, studying their works is just part of the normal process of literature review in which any intellectually responsible researcher must engage. A contemporary philosopher who ignores the history of philosophy is not dissimilar to the philosopher who only reads the work of her departmental colleagues or old grad school friends. A comprehensive view of the state of the discussion of a particular philosophical problem requires engagement with the history of philosophy. Alternatively, the history of philosophy is just philosophy.

This helps explain the special relationship between philosophy and its history. Physics, for example, makes progress at a much faster rate than philosophy. Phlogiston theory is a dead letter. The value of studying it for the physicist can only take the form of learning from past failures or giving her historical perspective. This is not so with, for example, mind-body dualism. Although currently unfashionable, it remains a live candidate for truth. Since Descartes offers one of the most worked out and sophisticated accounts of mind-body dualism, his work on the topic is still required reading for anyone thinking about the metaphysics of mind.

Although I think that philosophical progress is slow, even painfully so, I still believe that there has been progress in philosophy. I won't however, try to argue for that claim here. If you don't share my optimism about the progressive nature of philosophy (or at least its potential for progress), then something like the claim argued for above is an irresistible conclusion. I have argued above the the doctrines contained in the history of philosophy are not obsolete because philosophical progress has not been rapid enough to make them so. If you believe that philosophical progress is impossible, then, *a fortiori*, you don't think that the doctrines contained in the history of philosophy have been made obsolete by philosophical progress. If a philosophical doctrine has not been definitely refuted, then it remains a live candidate for truth.³

3 I am ignoring, for the purposes of this discussion, the anti-philosophical or quietistic position that holds that, not only does philosophy not make progress but it is not even a candidate for progress. If it is not even a candidate for progress then there is no sense in insisting that a philosophical doctrine remains a live candidate for truth. But this raises the question of why do philosophy at all more than it raises a

So where does this leave us with respect to methodology? How does the claim that the history of philosophy contains our near contemporaries change how to approach the study of the history of philosophy. There appears to me two main methodological consequences. The first is that we should not assume that a large portion of the philosophical lessons that we can learn from the history of philosophy will come from, as Bennett sometimes suggests, learning from mistakes. This means approaching the ideas of historical figures with the humility appropriate to someone whose epistemic situation with respect to the issues under discussion is not much better, if at all, than that of the historical figure being studied. This is not the “courtly deference” that pretends the historical figure is always right that Bennett rightly decries. But neither is it the high-handedness that pretends that the orthodoxies and presumptions of the present age are always more respectable and well-justified than the ideas of our predecessors. The second is that we need not eschew judgments of truth and falsity. Garber rightly thinks that there is only so much we can learn from the failures of our predecessors and so searches for other ways that we can benefit philosophically from the study of the history of philosophy. But this presumes that if there is philosophy to be directly learned from the history of philosophy at all, then it must come from studying failed theories. And this presumes that most of the theories of historical figures are failed. Until philosophy makes substantial sustained progress, we are in no position to dismiss our predecessors’ theories as failures. To learn from them does not require us, therefore, to learn from failures.

Other methodological issues sometimes stir heated disagreement. How much value is there in studying the works of minor figures? How much non-philosophical context must we be familiar with? Is it a valuable exercise or an anachronistic folly to bring to bear contemporary concepts and techniques in our attempt to understand the ideas of a historical figure? But it seems to me to be unadvisable to attempt to formulate universal prescriptions with respect to questions such as these. The ideal historian would have deep familiarity with all relevant contexts, both philosophical and otherwise. But she would also have the highest degree of philosophical sophistication having thought deeply about all the relevant philosophical issues and being familiar with all the latest ideas about them. This is an ideal that, obviously, no one researcher can realize. For this reason, we must be thankful for the social division of intellectual labor that allows us to distribute these various attributes among many researchers and even many generations of researchers. The task before us is vast and, ultimately, it is the work of an entire civilization.

It is difficult to have a debate about methodology without turning one’s interlocutors into straw men. This is because there is only a small range of issues about which reasonable

people might disagree. The real differences between different methodologies are generally more a matter of emphasis and nuance than sharp differences. This observation ought to give comfort. There is broad consensus about method with real disagreement only at the margins. Perhaps it is not too much to hope that this widely shared sense of what is reasonable in historical method is explained by the fact the we are, together, on the right road.