

## Some reflections on method in the history of philosophy

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Imagine that someone has just finished giving a talk on some historical figure in philosophy — say, Aristotle. Someone in the audience raises her hand and says, “But you’ve got Aristotle wrong. His actual view is . . .” and then she offers some textual evidence or what have you for the claim that the lecturer has Aristotle wrong.

The lecturer’s reply will fall into one of two types. The first type will say, “Well, maybe Aristotle didn’t really hold  $p$ , but surely  $p$  is worth talking about for its own sake.” The second type will say something like “I read that passage differently, and here’s why” or “But here’s this other passage where Aristotle says something opposed to what you say he says.”

I have no further interest in talking about lecturers of the first type. Whatever they are doing, it is not the history of philosophy. Let them be unto us as publicans and sinners. What interests me is lecturers of the second type, which is to say, genuine historians of philosophy. I want to point out how very different are the approaches that historians of philosophy take to their subject matter. “Getting  $S$  right” — where  $S$  is the philosopher under consideration — is the shared goal of them all. But why it matters that we get  $S$  right, and how one goes about getting  $S$  right, are contentious issues. Let me state from the outset that I do not intend to argue for the superiority of one approach over others. I will criticize some abuses of each approach, but I will criticize them *as* abuses. I will also explain the approach I take in my own work — once again, not because I think my approach is intrinsically superior to others, but just so readers will know what they can, and what they cannot, expect from me. I have profited from reading work that represents a broad range of approaches.

At one extreme (an ideal type, perhaps not instantiated) is the historian who regards himself as “a curator in the museum of ideas.” (I owe the phrase to D. S. Hutchinson.) The aim of a historian of philosophy on this view is to dust off the accretions of misunderstanding that have accumulated on a philosopher over the centuries and display him in his pristine condition, properly labeled and catalogued, and carefully displayed in his historical context. This sort of historian has no official interest in the plausibility of the views thus displayed, the success of the arguments deployed to support them, or the possibility of bringing the philosopher into some contemporary discussion. I say he has no *official* interest in these matters. He may well have an unofficial interest in them. He probably has philosophical views (he is, after all, housed in a philosophy department) and is interested in philosophical assessment. But

he regards all such concerns as alien to the properly historical enterprise. The curator of an automotive museum is concerned with the development of the cars in his collection, and no doubt he drives a car of his own; but he never takes his exhibits out for a spin.

At the other extreme (another ideal type, perhaps not instantiated) is the historian who reads older philosophy in just the same spirit in which her non-historical colleague reads the current journals. No doubt the arguments one finds there *have* a historical context, and maybe even a genetic explanation in extra-philosophical terms. Think, for example, of the overwhelmingly naturalist bent of much of contemporary philosophy. No doubt one can explain it — in one sense of ‘explain’ — by noting such historical influences as the stunning success of the natural sciences, the secularization of Anglo-American culture, and what not. But the metaphysician down the hall does not suppose that his understanding of the latest article in *The Journal of Philosophy* will be enriched by a meditation on such broad developments. Of course, there are likely to be arguments in the paper that are directed at particular views put forward by others. But one doesn’t even need to know who those others are in order to get out of the article whatever is worth getting. One certainly doesn’t need to know that the views being refuted are common, that they are supported by philosophers of type  $x$  and rejected by those of type  $y$ , or that they are suggested by parallel developments in discipline  $d$  or cultural phenomenon  $\varphi$ . A historian of this type will scoff at suggestions that she needs to explore the institutional context of Duns Scotus’s thought or the religious roots of Kant’s philosophy. If something about context is important to Duns Scotus or Kant, she will say, then we’ll find it in the arguments. The point is always to understand what’s at issue philosophically, not to understand how what’s at issue came to be at issue.

Actual historians of philosophy probably all fall somewhere on a spectrum between these two extremes, but my impression is that very many historians are clustered precariously close to the ends. I won’t engage in the admittedly delightful enterprise of classifying other scholars, but it’s no great secret that my own work is close, and sometimes *very* close, to the second extreme. As a friendly but firm reviewer pointed out, I once managed to write an introduction to an Anselm translation with so little historical stage-setting that I didn’t even think to mention Anselm’s *dates*. When I read one of Duns Scotus’s attacks on Henry of Ghent, I don’t even care whether Scotus actually got Henry right. (Scotus doesn’t seem to have cared, so why should I?)

When I read one of Ockham’s attacks on Scotus, though, I do care whether Ockham got Scotus right. The reason is that I *like* Scotus. I think he gets the big things right — ask me about univocity some time — and I think he’s brilliant. And this points up another shortcoming of historians in my own neighborhood. Our philosophical leanings can easily lead us to scrimp on the historian’s proper task. Since what we’re really interested in is the philosophy, we are tempted to blow right past arguments that

don't seem philosophically fruitful to us, even though our author may have worn out several scribes in the course of his dictation of that argument. A historian nearer the opposite end of the spectrum will try to figure out what that argument is doing there — he doesn't care that the argument in question is no good — and will not rest content until he can explain its appearance, probably in historical terms. And it should go without saying (except that folks in my neighborhood ignore the fact) that the explanation is altogether likely to cast light on our author, even to illuminate the arguments that we *did* find interesting for our own purposes. In short, the work we are tempted to shirk is likely to be of service in helping us *get the author right*: which is, remember, the goal of everyone in all the neighborhoods. (Remember always that those who do not have this goal are in no neighborhood at all, but have been cast into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.)

Philosophical partisanship leads to outright abuse of history when, as it sometimes does, it encourages the historian to mangle the views of an author. An example of this is the “If he'd just thought harder, he would have been Kant” phenomenon. (A friend of mine reports that an extremely important moral philosopher once said this of a figure covered in a seminar my friend took on the British Moralists.) More than one recent history of moral philosophy has treated predecessors to Kant as if they are best understood as groping towards the Kantian view that the historians obviously take to be the most philosophically interesting or defensible moral theory. No doubt without meaning to, they misapply words that — read by us, now, from our post-Kantian vantage point — can be taken as saying strikingly proto-Kantian things, but which in the authors' actual historical context had to mean something very different. This is the sort of abuse that makes me especially grateful to historians near the opposite end of the spectrum, who are robustly aware that philosophers are always responding to their contemporaries and immediate predecessors, not groping mystically toward some determinate future enlightenment.

On the other hand, historians near that end of the spectrum sometimes make claims for the importance of historical context in getting an author right that strike my sort of historian as grossly exaggerated. I'll probably be shunned for saying so, but I've never seen a detailed discussion of Augustine's encounter with the neo-Platonists that I thought shed the slightest light on Augustine's actual thought. The reason, though, is that Augustine was (by the standards of anyone this side of outer darkness) a perfectly dreadful reader of the neo-Platonists. He may have had Plotinus in front of him, but what he read there was textbook middle-period Plato. So we don't need to know Plotinus to understand Augustine better; we don't even need to know which bits of Plotinus Augustine had seen. What we need to know is what Augustine got from Plotinus, in a sense of 'got' that doesn't imply it was actually there before Augustine got

it. And what that was, Augustine tells us himself. In contrast, some historical figures actually were good readers, and in their case attention to historical context is much more likely to be of service. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the proof of the relevance of historical context is in its actual illumination of the philosopher under investigation. What I call the plop-and-point method is an abuse. That's the method one sees in any number of books in the history of philosophy, in which there is an opening chapter or two on predecessor  $x$  or historical development  $y$ , followed by a discussion of the principal topic of the book in which the relevance of the historical context is utterly indiscernible. The author has plopped down some history, pointed to it, and then proceeded as if he had never done anything of the sort. Bad historians of my type would never write the opening chapters. Good historians of the other type would write them, and then take care to show how they make a difference later on.

The popularity of the plop-and-point method leads me to suspect, in fact, that sometimes the demand for historical context is simply a demand for *additional facts*, whether those facts help at all in the project of getting the author right. "Tell me about the institutional setting, the social currents, the ecclesiastical politics, of the author's time." Well, why? Because it will help us get the author right, or because you just happen to find such things interesting? If you demand a chapter on  $S$ 's intellectual milieu because there's no understanding his views without it, then the demand is legitimate. If you demand it just because that's the sort of thing every treatment of  $S$  ought to have, then it's not.

That is, I do understand the task of the historian of philosophy as different from that of the intellectual historian or historian of ideas. To demand from a historian of philosophy a discussion of historical matters that cannot be shown to illuminate the philosophical content of an author is to import standards extraneous to his proper project. ('Proper' here does not mean "demanded by propriety," but "pertaining to his distinctive role." My whole point here is that there is nothing wrong with extra-philosophical history, but that it is indeed extra-philosophical. My view about dealing with such matters is like the traditional Anglican view of auricular confession: All may, some should, none must.) Individual historians of philosophy may of course also be more generally interested in intellectual, social, ecclesiastical, and political history, and so they may themselves wish to write histories in which the object of their philosophical studies is shown against a broader historical background. But historians of philosophy with narrower interests should not be faulted for sticking closely to their job description.

The upshot is simply this: sometimes historical context is illuminating, in the sense that it contributes to getting the author right, and sometimes it's not. The reflexive complaint that "you haven't put this in historical context" is methodologically

unsound, and reflexive treatment of philosophical arguments as if they emerged out of the philosopher's head in some history-proof isolation booth is methodologically unsound as well. But between these two extremes there is surely room for a variety of approaches. Some will be more drawn to the curatorial side of the history of philosophy, others to the argumentative side. "Let there be in us no discord, but one spirit."

My aim here is irenic, not polemical. But I can't resist closing with a question that suggests why I've taken up residence in my particular neighborhood. Do you think your understanding of what I have said in this essay, or your assessment of its merits, would be at all enhanced if you knew specifically what prompted me to write it?