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FORUM: PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY

Does Philosophy Need to Know Its History?

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Abstract

In this essay, I address the question whether philosophy needs to know its history, by comparing and contrasting philosophy with other areas of enquiry. In particular, I emphasize a feature of philosophy that distinguishes it from every other area of enquiry, namely that its history can be a significant contribution to it. That already points towards a positive answer to the question, although the answer takes some teasing out and towards the end of the essay I distinguish between what follows from this answer concerning philosophy as a discipline and what follows from it concerning the practice of individual philosophers. In between, I explore two factors that give philosophy this distinctive relation to its history: what I call Self-Consciousness and what I call Appropriation. By Self-Consciousness, I mean the fact that the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical issue; by Appropriation, I mean the fact that, with respect to any great philosophical idea of the past that is no longer viable, there always remains a question about what we can do with it.

Keywords Philosophy · History · History of philosophy · History of ideas · Bernard Willaims · Gilles Deleuze

The question that Johnny Lyons has asked us to address is whether philosophy needs to know its history. Before I address it, I want to enter two caveats. The first caveat relates to the fact that each expression in the question has a significance that provides a suitable potential focus for the question as a whole. Thus, there is the issue of whether *philosophy* needs to know its history in a sense in which individual philosophers perhaps don't. There is the issue of whether philosophy *needs* to know its history, as opposed, say, to its merely benefiting from doing so. There is the issue of whether philosophy needs to *know* its history, as opposed, say, to its needing somehow to absorb that history in a less self-conscious way. There is the issue of whether philosophy needs to know *its* history, as opposed, say, to its needing to know some history of a broader kind. The first caveat is that, although I hope that what I have to say will have a bearing on each of these issues, often it will do so only implicitly: I won't always separate them out in what follows. (But there will be one notable exception, towards the very end.)

The second caveat relates to the fact that addressing any of these issues is liable to involve generalizing, which in turn poses a familiar problem. It is extremely difficult to generalize about issues of this kind without succumbing either to vacuity or to falsity. One finds oneself wanting to say that the relation between philosophy and its history is thus and so, or (in contrast to that) that the relation between some other enterprise and its history is *not* thus and so, or that an undertaking of this or that kind never amounts to such and such; and immediately all sorts of apparent counterexamples spring to mind, none of which can be dismissed except by means of a suitably question-begging interpretation of what it is to be thus and so or such and such. I think we just have to be Aristotelian about this and accept that the only non-trivial claims that we can make about such matters are claims about how things are 'for the most part'. The second caveat is that, at multiple points in what follows, this qualification is to be taken as read.

Having entered those two caveats, I also want to set aside a sense in which philosophy patently needs to know its history but which is nevertheless of little interest in this context, in as much as it holds only because it is a sense in which *any* area of relatively organized communal intellectual enquiry, and certainly any academic discipline, needs to know its history: it tells us nothing distinctive about philosophy. I have in mind the fact that, given any such area of enquiry, each relevant question that has already definitively been answered, each relevant advance that has already clearly been made,

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and each relevant insight that has already been achieved and generally acknowledged as such must have a bearing on how those who are engaged in that area of enquiry carry on, and on what it still makes sense for them to do. It would be absurd for a contemporary mathematician to spend time trying to determine whether π is rational. Lambert got there some two hundred and fifty years ago. If a contemporary mathematician established the result afresh—and I'm prescinding here from the admittedly interesting possibility of gaining mathematical insight by finding new proofs for old results, in other words I am assuming that the only matter of interest at stake is whether π is rational—then this would be reinvention of the wheel. Mathematics would be in a poor state if it could not ensure against such a waste of time, and a fortiori, of course, if it could not ensure against reinvention of the square wheel, such as the reestablishment of set theory in its discredited naïve form. A basic knowledge of the history of any such area of enquiry is therefore clearly relevant to those who are engaged in it. They need to know what the state of play is; they need to know what the *issues* are.

This applies even if the area of enquiry is highly specialized and concerned with the minutiae of some problem that has only recently begun to preoccupy a small group of initiates. To say that this problem has only 'recently' begun to preoccupy this group is still to say something about the past. None of the members of the group can know where they are without some minimal awareness of where they just were.

For the members of a group to acquire some minimal awareness of where they just were hardly requires serious historical scholarship though. The issue for us is whether there is a distinctive sense in which philosophy needs to know its history, a sense that signals the need for just such scholarship, perhaps extending back millennia. If so, then this is in contrast to other disciplines. It is in contrast, for example, to astronomy. It would be silly to engage in a scholarly historical study of astronomy for anything other than its *historical* interest. Not that that interest is not considerable: this is not in any way meant to disparage the history of astronomy, nor the history of science more generally. The point is only that the history of science is of value as history, not as science. (This, incidentally, is already a case in which my second caveat applies and the qualification 'for the most part' is to be taken as read.)

But as soon as we pose the question whether it's different in the case of philosophy, we confront a complication—albeit a complication which also morphs into an answer to that very question. The complication is that it's not entirely straightforward what the history of philosophy even *is*. This is because of a distinction that is often drawn, and was famously drawn by Bernard Williams in a number of places, but first in the preface to his book on Descartes, between the history of philosophy and the history of ideas: the latter, as Williams himself puts it, is history before it is philosophy, while with the former it is the other way round.[1] To borrow an example due to Nigel Warburton, when we study the influence of Rousseau's views on the French revolution, we are engaged in the history of ideas, whereas when we study Rousseau's views themselves, say his views about democracy, we are engaged in the history of philosophy. The distinction is not sharp: it would be impossible to engage in either activity, at least in any worthwhile way, without at the same time engaging, to some extent, in the other. In particular, it would be impossible to do significant work in the history of philosophy without first having a sense of what philosophers of the past were presupposing, what they were aiming to do, what they were reacting against, what their milieu was, and so forth, all of which requires engaging, however minimally, in the history of ideas. Another way to put this is that, although the history of philosophy is in the first instance philosophy, it is history too. The fact remains that the distinction between the two is important, however unsharp.

And, contained within the distinction, we find an answer of sorts to the question posed—whether there is something distinctive to be said here about philosophy. Indeed, there is. For the very drawing of the distinction marks a contrast between philosophy and any other area of enquiry. In particular, it marks a contrast once again between philosophy and astronomy. There isn't any such contrast in the case of astronomy: a historical undertaking, with respect to astronomy, will always be history before it is astronomy.

Why is this? Why can't a historical undertaking with respect to astronomy be astronomy before it is history? This is not fundamentally a question about astronomy. Essentially the same question arises in relation to any other science: why can't a historical undertaking with respect to chemistry be chemistry before it is history, or a historical undertaking with respect to biology be biology before it is history? And the answer in each case is the same: because it is a historical undertaking with a focus on *discovery*. Even when it serves as a partial vindication of what practitioners of the relevant science think and say and do in the present, as opposed to what they thought and said and did in the past, this is only because they have themselves already done the work of discrediting the theories of their predecessors: they have already determined where we are now, and the historical study is only really relevant to how we got there, not to where we should go next. Whatever interest this may have for practitioners of the science, it has little claim on their attention *qua practitioners of the science*.

By contrast, there is a historical enterprise that is at the same time significantly philosophical, in other words that

[1] Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Pelican, 1978), p. 9.

really is philosophy before it is history. The question we need to consider is what it is about philosophy, in contrast to any other area of enquiry, that allows for such an enterprise.

We had better not answer this question by saying that it is not in the nature of philosophical theories of the past, as it is in the nature of scientific theories of the past, to be superseded and to become obsolete. That *is* in the nature of scientific theories of the past, and it does indeed help to explain why the historical study of them is always history before it is science. But philosophical theories of the past can be superseded and become obsolete too. Kant, who was in my view the greatest philosopher of all time, had a theory about the epistemic relation in which human beings stand to Euclidean geometry which was decisively refuted by twentieth-century advances in physics: as it stands, that theory is now irredeemable, whatever fascination it may still engender and however much, for that matter, may remain to be salvaged from it. Admittedly, decisive refutation has a rarity in philosophy that it does not have in science. But philosophical theories become obsolete in other ways too. Often they become obsolete for reasons of a more cultural kind, say reasons having to do with the ever decreasing support of religious authority: here I have in mind examples such as the view, shared by Descartes and Leibniz among others, that there is one uncreated substance on which every other substance depends for its existence.

Obsolescence, then, is not the key to explaining the crucial difference between philosophy and science that we are trying to tease out. But maybe what follows in its wake is. For how clear is it, in any of the cases that come to mind of a philosophical theory that is now obsolete, that the theory has been replaced by something that is an improvement on it? How clear is it, for that matter, that it has been *replaced* at all? Isn't it rather that questions get posed differently, attention shifts elsewhere, and new problems arise? Might we therefore answer the question by saying that in philosophy, unlike in any of the sciences, there is never any real progress, hence nothing to preclude treating all that has gone before as equally worthy of philosophical attention?

Well, no; we had better not say that either. For one thing, if a philosophical theory becomes obsolete without being replaced by anything, this can itself count as progress. The reason why the theory becomes obsolete may not lie in any fault in how it occupies the space that it does; the reason may lie in the very fact that it occupies the space that it does. More generally, there are all sorts of philosophical achievements that count as improvements on what preceded them. One very straightforward, if not very momentous, example is Frege's sharpened formulation of Kant's distinction between analytic and synthetic judgements. This is, quite simply, a better formulation than Kant's own. And I take it that this is an apposite example whatever the correct verdict on Quine's subsequent repudiation of the distinction: Quine would have had a much softer target if he had had only Kant's own original formulation of the distinction to work with.

What is true is that there are many significant developments in philosophy whose significance is *not* a matter of progress. Thus, we still have a great deal to learn from Aristotle's views about ethics; and while we also have a great deal to learn from Mill's views about ethics, we certainly have no more to learn from them just because Mill was working some two thousand years later than Aristotle. This is not to deny that the relation between Aristotle's views and Mill's has a crucial diachronic aspect. No doubt it does, but that does not make the relation one of progress. Aristotle's views sit alongside Mill's as candidates for being taking equally seriously—indeed, in the view of many contemporary ethicists, far more seriously.

However, this fact about philosophy, important and relevant though it is, *still* doesn't furnish an answer to the question what is distinctive about philosophy. For even if it were not so, that is even if the significance of philosophical developments were always a matter of progress, still what had been superseded could continue to command philosophical interest, not just historical interest. Reconsider the first example that I gave of a philosophical theory that is now obsolete, namely Kant's theory about the epistemic relation in which human beings stand to Euclidean geometry. That theory remains of the utmost philosophical interest (I'll say a little more about this later). And this in turn means that there is still a contrast with astronomy and other areas of enquiry that needs to be accounted for. How can great philosophical ideas of the past, however far beyond the pale they are, continue to command our philosophical attention, in a way in which great ideas of the past from other areas of enquiry that are equally far beyond the pale can't?

I think there are two main reasons. I shall refer to these as Self-Consciousness and Appropriation.

To begin with Self-Consciousness. The very fact that some philosophical idea or theory is no longer viable can *itself* be of enduring philosophical interest. And this is because of the self-conscious character of philosophy, in particular because of the fact that the nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical issue. (Again there is a contrast with astronomy.) Acknowledging that some philosophical idea or theory is no longer viable prompts us to ask, 'Why? What is it about where we are now that puts *that* beyond the pale? What are we no longer prepared to take for granted, or what are we perhaps no longer able to take for granted, that philosophers once did? And, conversely, what were they once not prepared, or not able, to take for granted that we now do? And to what extent is any of this to our advantage?' The answers to such questions are sometimes straightforward. We are no longer prepared to take for granted that space is Euclidean, and this is to our advantage because space is *not* Euclidean. But sometimes the assessment will need to be

much subtler. And, crucially, it will itself be philosophical. By prompting us to reflect on how we think philosophically, it will be prompting us to think philosophically: it will be prompting us to familiarize ourselves with what initially appears strange, to estrange ourselves from what initially appears familiar, and to ask ourselves what it takes to do either of these (an aspect of philosophy whose importance Nietzsche emphasized and whose importance has subsequently been emphasized by Williams too).

And note that this in turn gives the lie to yet another enticing and prevalent misconception about the history of philosophy that Williams works hard to scotch, namely that its principal value lies in its indicating voices of the past that can be heard as participating in contemporary philosophical discussions. On the contrary, Williams insists, its principal value lies in its indicating voices of the past that *can't* be heard as participating in contemporary philosophical discussions. It indicates voices that challenge whatever presuppositions make contemporary philosophical discussions possible, and it furthers philosophical reflection by signalling alternatives to what, if we remain rooted in the present, we shall not just take for granted, but shall unthinkingly take for granted. Our hope for philosophy (a hope that Williams again borrows from Nietzsche, expressed in Nietzsche's case in connection with classical philology) is that, in acting against the present age, it benefits an age to come.

This is a good cue to consider the second reason why great philosophical ideas can continue to command our philosophical attention: Appropriation. Appropriation is perhaps even more important than Self-Consciousness. Indeed on some moderately generous ways of construing it, it subsumes Self-Consciousness. The point is this. Even with respect to a philosophical idea or theory that is no longer viable, there may still be a question, and in the case of a great philosophical idea or theory there always will still be a question, of what we can *do* with it. Thus, if I may be excused a little autobiography, I myself have spent much of my philosophical career trying to put to work ideas that I take to be no longer viable: most notably, Kant's transcendental idealism, which is itself of course related to the example of obsolescence to which I have referred a couple of times; Kant's theory about the epistemic relation in which human beings stand to Euclidean geometry; and the early Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing. In fact, I have tried to put these to joint work. I believe that we can extract from Wittgenstein's distinction a fruitful conception of the inexpressible, and from Kant's transcendental idealism a fruitful conception of what may result when we try, unsuccessfully, to express it.

But what exactly is it about philosophy that allows for this kind of appropriation—in contrast, yet again, to astronomy? I think that philosophy allows for this kind of appropriation because it is a fundamentally creative conceptual exercise which is not answerable to any independent reality, which is nevertheless sufficiently bound up with essentially contestable evaluation not to be able to issue in definitive results in the way in which mathematics does, and, critically, whose relics, unlike those of mathematics, have a power to enlighten us that extends beyond our seeing what is wrong with them. The vital distinctions here are of course distinctions of degree, and my second caveat certainly applies. Even so, I think that this signals something distinctive about philosophy. Philosophy allows us to assimilate, interrogate, probe, rework, and develop what we do not want, and may no longer be able, simply to rehearse. My favourite metaphor for this process is that of a musical theme and variations. Consider Beethoven's Diabelli variations. When the composer Antonio Diabelli presented Beethoven with a rather trite little waltz that he had written, asking Beethoven to create a variation on it, Beethoven created thirty-three of them, which he assembled as his last major work for piano, possibly even his greatest. The aesthetic deficiencies of the theme do not in any way detract from the aesthetic profundity of the variations. True, the analogy must not be pushed too hard: no philosophical idea or theory that could be said to be *trite* would be fit for this kind of appropriation. But the point is this. A philosophical idea or theory can be fit for this kind of appropriation if—that is, even if—there is no longer any question of our subscribing to it. It follows that, when philosophers succeed in appropriating work of the past in this way, they are not simply reliving the past: they are connecting what was being said then with what is being said now, and they are saying something that makes creative use of both. This *may* mean continuing to say much of what is being said now, but in new terms, or with a more acute sense of what else might be said and of what is therefore being taken for granted, or even with a renewed confidence in what is being taken for granted. (This is part of what I had in mind when I alluded to the possibility that Appropriation subsumes Self-Consciousness.) What matters is that, in the best history of philosophy, there is an active sense of the possibilities for the future that the tendencies of the past have opened up, be the disruptions and continuities in those possibilities as they may. Historians of philosophy can engage philosophically with work of the past in a way in which only crackpot historians of science could think it appropriate to engage scientifically with work of the past.

Notice, by the way, how the varying historical contexts of the historians are themselves critical to this process. There are always going to be indefinitely many such ways to appropriate work of the past, and these in turn are always going to be sensitive to the shifting presuppositions of the times and the degree of disruption that the appropriation would involve. Thus, what *we* can do with Aristotle is different from what the Scholastics could do with Aristotle; and indeed this is due, in part, to the fact that what we can

do with Aristotle is informed, among other things, by what the Scholastics did with him.

Very well; where do these considerations leave us? I have made use of a musical analogy. So does Williams. In the preface to his book on Descartes, when characterizing the history of philosophy in contrast to the history of ideas, he cites Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* in which, as he says, 'the melodic line is Pergolesi's, the harmony and orchestration Stravinsky's'.[2] The melodic line here is intended to correspond to the philosophical concerns under investigation, the harmony and orchestration to the principles governing their rational reconstruction by the investigator. Now as it happens, the attribution of this melodic line to Pergolesi has since been shown to be spurious. But the point survives. And there is a wonderful quotation by Stravinsky himself, in connection with it, which I think illustrates both what Williams is saying and what I have been trying to say: '*Pulcinella* was my discovery of the past, the epiphany through which the whole of my late work became possible. It was a backward look, of course—the first of many love affairs in that direction—but it was a look in the mirror, too'. So—does all of this intimate that the fundamental reason why philosophy differs from astronomy in the ways that I have been trying to articulate, as it does from any other science, is that it is not itself a science, but an art?

No. It's true that nearly all of the contrasts that I have been at pains to draw so far have been between philosophy and science. But I have more than once insisted that philosophy differs in the relevant respects from any other area of enquiry, and I have meant this in a sense of 'enquiry' broad enough to include artistic endeavours. Philosophy is not a science, but it is not an art either. For one thing, notice that what we said about science and its relation to history applies to art too: the history of art is not an artistic exercise, any more than the history of science is a scientific exercise. Nor are significant contributions to art historical exercises, any more than significant contributions to science are—at least not in the straightforward sense in which writing a commentary on Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* is. One can't write a decent commentary on any great work of philosophy without attending to the questions that were being asked at the time, the presuppositions that were being made, the authorities that were being invoked, and suchlike, indeed without attempting to re-enact a former way of making sense of things. Playing Beethoven's 'Appassionata', or even for that matter taking inspiration from Beethoven's 'Appassionata' in composing a piano sonata of one's own, doesn't involve anything quite like that. This is all related to the point that we noted earlier: the fact that the history of philosophy is philosophy before it is history should not obscure the fact that it is history too. In many respects, philosophy is poised between science and art, sharing certain features with the one but not the other and sharing certain other features with the other but not the one. In this critical respect, however, it is philosophy that is the outlier. This is one respect of many in which philosophy is *sui generis*.

Incidentally, I have tried to accentuate how far I have been inspired by Williams in developing this view, but you may well have recognized a Deleuzian inspiration too. And it's worth emphasizing that in both cases the inspiration derives as much from their practice as from their preaching. Both Williams and Deleuze produce work in the history of philosophy that in my view beautifully exemplifies the virtues of the *genre* that I have been trying to portray. Think, for example, of the creativity with which Williams extracts from his study of Descartes the idea of an absolute conception of reality, which he elsewhere puts to significant non-Cartesian use. Or think of how Deleuze's study of Spinoza's *Ethics* is not only one of the best introductions to the thought of Spinoza, but also one of the best introductions to the thought of Deleuze.[3]

Be that as it may, I don't doubt that you will be wondering, as I approach the end of this essay, what the upshot is. More to the point, I don't doubt that you will have noticed that I haven't answered the question yet! (I frequently lambast my students for not answering the question. It would be a poor showing if I ended up guilty of the same thing.)

Very well: *does philosophy need to know its history*?

Yes. The analogy with a musical theme and variations shows what we can expect of philosophy of a certain kind, and, I would contend, of a kind that is indispensable to the flourishing of the discipline. There is indeed a sense—a distinctive sense that does not apply to any other academic discipline—in which philosophy needs to know its history.

But if we return to the very first distinction that I drew, within my first caveat, between philosophy and philosophers, matters begin to look different. As far as individual philosophers are concerned, there seems to me plenty of evidence, above all within the analytic tradition, that a knowledge of the history of philosophy is dispensable. I think it's a shame if any individual shows no great interest in the history of their discipline, and I think they might very well, often enough, be missing out on something that would interest them more than they realize. But in so far as it is true that individual philosophers 'should' take an interest in the history of their discipline, this is only in the rather tame sense in which *any* cultivated person 'should' take an interest in great intellectual achievements of the past, what these achievements show us about the human spirit, and suchlike.

[2] Williams 1978, p.10.

[3] Gilles Deleuze *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1992, Zone Books).

Yes, there is a sense in which each of us whose business is philosophy should study Plato; but each of us should, in that same sense, attend productions of Shakespeare, or marvel at ancient architecture, or listen to Bach. It's not clear that if one of us happens not to take any such interest in the history of philosophy, it's any worse than that. In particular, there's no reason to think that that individual's own contribution to the discipline suffers as a result. Some very technical work in analytic philosophy, for example, is no more compromised by ignorance of the history of the discipline than work in mathematics is. Nor, I hasten to add, am I especially reluctant to concede this. On the contrary, it fits well with one of my own firmest convictions about philosophy, namely that there is no such thing as *the* way to practise it.

Philosophers can be innovative and creative without taking significant advantage of anything in their non-local history, then. I think we have to accept that. But their contributions would be like rain falling on a river. If philosophy as a discipline were similarly disconnected from its history, that would be different; and it would be serious. There would be no river. There would be only a stagnant pool that was periodically drained and replenished. That would be fundamentally to its detriment. Philosophy needs to allow what is downstream to be both disturbed and at the same time stimulated by the currents flowing into it from what is upstream. It needs, in other words, to know its history.

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