The three virtues of an historical approach to the history of philosophy

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Introduction

In what follows I want to suggest that one way in which the employment prospects of philosophy graduates may be improved is by rethinking some of our assumptions about the nature of the history of philosophy. There are, I shall suggest, a number of different ways in which one might approach the history of philosophy. By thinking about some common assumptions about the value and purpose of the study of the history of philosophy, I shall suggest that it will be possible to introduce a range of transferable key skills to students as part of the existing philosophy syllabus. I shall save my explicit comments about these transferable skills until the end, and then they will be brief, but I hope that it will become clear why my discussion of methodology in the study of the history of philosophy forms the necessary foundation for those final comments.

Two Approaches to the History of Philosophy

There is a certain school of thought that suggests that philosophical texts should be read independently of their historical context, as if handed to us in plain covers without any indication of when or where they were written. The virtue of such an approach, this school of thought suggests, is that one's attention remains solely with the philosophical arguments contained within the text and one's concern is directed solely towards evaluating those philosophical arguments with reference to what they might contribute to current philosophical debates (e.g. Cowley, 40). Following Watson I shall call this the analytic history of philosophy. Watson notes a number of classic works in the analytic history of philosophy, including Bouwsma's essay 'Descartes' Evil Genius', Hintikka's 'Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?', Jonathan Bennett's *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Essential Themes*, and Watson names Bennett as "the dean of contemporary analytic history of philosophy" (Watson, 526). For authors such as these, what matters is not when or where a philosophical argument was first propounded but rather the internal logical structure and coherence of that argument.

For example, someone adopting this general approach might want to examine arguments for the existence of God. They might scour the history of philosophy for such arguments, extracting the relevant material from Aquinas, Descartes, and others. Then they might translate each of these arguments into formal logic, comparing their internal logical consistency and relative merits as arguments. With such an approach, all that matters is the arguments, and who wrote them or when they were written is of no consequence to the task at hand.
In contrast to this approach there is what may be called historical or contextual history of philosophy. This second approach attempts to examine philosophical arguments of the past within their historical and intellectual context. In fact, it has been suggested by Osler that there are two distinct contextual approaches, one focusing upon the context of other philosophical ideas surrounding a philosopher's arguments and the other focusing upon the social and historical context within which a philosopher developed their arguments, but for the moment I shall put this distinction to one side. The contextual approach - broadly conceived - attempts to understand a philosophical position in terms of its relation to the intellectual movements of its day and those earlier philosophies that may have influenced its development.

Let's briefly consider two examples, both concerned with works by philosophers from the history of philosophy that are commonly used in introductory courses: Plato and Descartes. In the case of Plato's Republic, for instance, one could argue that in order to understand the motives and context for this work properly it is necessary to know something about the Peloponnesian War, the history of Athenian politics including the opposition between democracy and the 'thirty tyrants', and the political organization of Sparta. Suitable reading alongside the Republic might include extracts from Thucydides. In the case of Descartes' Meditations, one could argue that this text should be read against the backdrop of the Reformation and the Copernican revolution, and with reference to the work of contemporaries such as Hobbes. One might also argue that the Meditations - with their focus upon arguments concerning the existence of God - should be supplemented with some of Descartes' scientific writings in order to give a more balanced and well-rounded view of his work as a whole. In each of these examples, adopting this sort of approach may enable one to uncover the various implicit cultural assumptions that are not made explicit within a philosophical text. This, in turn, may help one to understand the motives behind a particular philosophical argument, motives that may have been obvious to contemporary readers but that are less obvious to modern readers.

The principal problem with the analytic approach to the history of philosophy is that its focus is determined by what is and is not considered philosophically interesting today. Issues of vital concern to the philosophers under study may be overlooked if those issues no longer form part of the contemporary canon of philosophical problems. If, for instance, one reads Plotinus as if he were a contemporary colleague, then one will run the risk of countless anachronisms. Although one may well gain a number of insights relevant to contemporary debates, one runs the risk of failing to comprehend the works of the philosopher being studied in their own terms. Descartes will never have the opportunity to be heard in his own voice, so to speak. In short, one fails to gain any real insight into the history of philosophy, the subject supposedly being studied.

Indeed, one might say that just as the philosophy of history is a philosophical inquiry into the nature of history, so the history of philosophy is (or should be) a historical investigation into the past of philosophy. While its content is philosophical, its methodology is (or, again, should be) historical (see Phillips; Gilson, 24-34). As Watson puts it, "what is unique to the history of philosophy is that it is history" (Watson, 525). The analytic historian of philosophy who analyses the logical structure of any sentence or argument without reference to its wider philosophical or historical context may well be doing philosophy - even very good philosophy - but they will certainly not be doing history. In contrast, the contextual historical approach pays appropriate attention to the presence of the word 'history' in the phrase 'history of philosophy', and in doing so pays attention to the sorts of scholarly concerns that typify the academic study of history. As Jonathan Barnes has noted, if you really want to study a philosopher like Aristotle properly you must pay serious attention to textual, exegetical, and historical issues (Barnes, xvi-xvii). Like it or not, studying Aristotle means doing history, and as Barnes comments "historical curiosity is far from an ignoble motive" (Barnes, xviii).

None of this means that philosophy degrees should be reduced to courses in the history of ideas. All it suggests is that the courses within a philosophy syllabus devoted to the history of philosophy should be taken seriously as history courses. The wide range of other types of courses in a philosophy degree will of course remain purely philosophical in approach.

The first of the three virtues of this historical or contextual approach to the history of philosophy, then, is that it does scholarly justice to philosophy's past.
While some philosophers may remain sceptical about the philosophical value of this approach to the history of philosophy, a number of contributions to the recent philosophy pedagogy literature have drawn attention to the philosophical benefits of such a historical approach (see McDermott; Schutte). In particular, Schutte has suggested that a historically orientated course offers a much better stimulus to critical thinking than a 'contemporary problems' orientated course. Students who follow the latter, she reports, often fail to develop any real critical distance from their own cultural presuppositions and the debate of current philosophical problems tends to take place within the confines of the students' existing cultural framework. In contrast, students following a historically orientated course have an opportunity to develop a historical awareness and a certain critical distance from their own culture. For example, students reading Plato's Republic are forced to confront the widespread liberal Western assumption that democracy is the only credible political system in a way that they might not on a course devoted to the analysis of problems in contemporary political philosophy (see also Talaska).

Arguing along similar lines, McDermott has suggested that, compared to a properly historical introduction to philosophy, a problem-based course built around a series of contemporary articles is "professionally self-aggrandizing, pedagogically unwise, and philosophically counterproductive" (McDermott, 179). I can think of nothing more likely to put off a typical class of first year undergraduates than a course reading list comprised of the latest offerings from Mind. However, the same typical class may well be fascinated by the historical events surrounding the trial and death of Socrates, the reasons why Spinoza's apparently dry metaphysics led to attempts on his life, the eccentricities of Nietzsche's wanderings, Heidegger's relationship with National Socialism, or the details of Wittgenstein's biography. These extra-philosophical details may inspire a philosophical engagement that might otherwise have never happened.

The second virtue of the historical approach, then, is its contribution to the development of a critical philosophical attitude. Studying the history of philosophy as history may well have philosophical benefits as well as scholarly benefits.

Transferable Skills and the Historical Approach

Approaching the history of philosophy as history, then, has its scholarly virtues and can form just as good an introduction to philosophical thinking as a 'contemporary problems' introduction to philosophy. It also has a third virtue, I suggest, and this relates to the development of transferable skills.

The skills associated with the study of history have long been recognized as valuable transferable skills. The careful analysis and distillation of historical documents is a skill that has been prized in the Civil Service, for instance, where history graduates have often been more successful in securing positions than graduates of other disciplines. A wide range of other research-based jobs also benefit from such skills.

Documents produced by the official UK careers service - AGCAS - make the following remarks. The Signpost Sheet for philosophy graduates tactfully notes that "philosophy graduates are a diverse group about whose careers it is difficult to generalise" (Norman). By contrast, the Signpost Sheet for history reports that "history is regarded by many employers as being an excellent subject in which to develop valuable transferable skills. [...] These skills include: familiarity with methods of research; the competence to manage large and diverse quantities of information; the capability to accumulate, select, organise, synthesise and interpret a wide range of material; the ability to organise information in a logical and coherent manner; the understanding and analysis of issues, events and people [and so on and so on]" (Appleton). While no doubt many of these transferable skills may also be developed when studying philosophy, one gets the impression that often these are made more explicit as transferable skills when students study history. One also gets the impression that employers tends to associate such skills with history graduates, even if they do not consciously deny that other graduates may also have them as well.

Indeed, a recent article in The Times Higher Education Supplement with the title 'Past Opens the Door to Fortune in Future' reports recent research by David Nicholls of Manchester Metropolitan University on the value of the skills
of historical analysis in the current job market (see Utley). In particular, the research notes that a disproportionately large number of current cabinet ministers and university vice-chancellors are historians by training. Famous history graduates range from Gordon Brown, John Prescott, and Michael Portillo, to Louis Theroux, Timmy Mallet, and Ali G. According to its author - an academic historian of course - the skills associated with the study of history at university level form a valuable foundation for success in the present job market. Since reading the THES article I have seen Nicholls' own article based upon his research. As well as listing well-known politicians and journalists, it also names a host of senior civil servants and diplomats with history degrees. Bishops, chief constables, and company directors are also well represented. Not only does the study of history cultivate a range of desirable skills long acknowledged by employers, it also appears to enable a disproportionate number of history graduates reach the very top of their chosen careers.

On a more anecdotal level, a university careers adviser dealing with history students has reported to me that "employers of all types are very keen to recruit them and are anxious to let them know that their skills will be welcome". These employers include not only the Fast Stream of the Civil Service but also many in the legal profession, industry, and commerce. Indeed, this particular careers adviser has suggested that the real problem lies in convincing history graduates that business employers are genuinely interested in their skills; the employers need no convincing at all about the value of the transferable skills associated with the study of history.

**Summary**

In summary, philosophers have often distanced themselves from the term 'history' when they have taught the history of philosophy, careful to focus their attention on the philosophical arguments at hand and to avoid falling into the worst of all fates, merely reporting the history of ideas. I've suggested that in contrast we should take seriously the presence of the word 'history' in the phrase 'history of philosophy'. One of the advantages of doing so - although I should add not the only reason why we should - is that it will introduce students to a range of skills in historical method as well as the usual skills associated with the study of philosophy. Rather than shy away from this, I suggest that departments of philosophy should be keen to advertise that their students can benefit from this sort of training in historical method as well as the wide range of other skills usually associated with the study of philosophy. While some employers may, through lack of familiarity, be unsure about what goes on in a philosophy degree, their appetite for the skills held by history graduates appears to remain strong.

Given that the study of the history of philosophy usually forms a reasonable proportion of the typical undergraduate philosophy syllabus, students may benefit their future employment prospects if they, their departments, and their job application referees all emphasize that as part of their degree in philosophy they have also studied the **history** of their subject, with all that that entails. The scholarly skills associated with the study of history form a valuable complement to the wide range of skills that students of philosophy will develop during other parts of their degree.

**References**


Discussion Points

There was some critical debate of the relationship between the historical and philosophical skills - for example, are these quite different skills, which are brought together in the study of history of philosophy; or are they perhaps skills common to humanities disciplines, articulated with a differential emphasis?

These considerations also prompted reflection upon curriculum design - should a historical approach be adopted in order to foster such skills, or does a problem-based approach provide a better introduction to philosophy? It was speculated that a combined approach might be fruitful - for instance, a problem-based programme at introductory level, followed by an honours-level programme which incorporates some history of philosophy.
2.3 Hegel’s philosophy of history. 2.4 Hermeneutic approaches to history. 2.5 Conceptual philosophy of history. 3. Anglo-American philosophy of history.

Historians can turn to the best available theories in the social and behavioral sciences to arrive at theories about causal mechanisms and human behavior; so historical statements depend ultimately upon factual inquiry and theoretical reasoning. Ultimately, the historian’s task is to shed light on the what, why, and how of the past, based on inferences from the evidence of the present.

Three preliminary issues are relevant to almost all discussions of history and the philosophy of history. What can we learn from constructing semantic networks of familiar works in the history of philosophy? A fair amount, according to Mark Alfano, a philosopher at Delft University of Technology and Australian Catholic University, as he explains in the following guest post*—such as which concepts tend to get more attention from readers than might seem appropriate given their surprisingly smaller roles in the text, or how an author’s views change over time, for example. It’s an unusual method for a philosopher; readers should feel free to ask Professor Alfano questions about his approach in the comments. A version of this post was also published at Dr. Alfano’s blog. (For further details, see the update to this post.)

Western Philosophy - by which we usually mean everything apart from the Eastern Philosophy of China, India, Japan, Persia, etc - really began in Ancient Greece in about the 6th Century B.C. Thales of Miletus is usually considered the first proper philosopher, although he was just as concerned with natural philosophy (what we now call science) as with philosophy as we know it. He provided the first real opposition to the Materialism of the Pre-Socratics, and he developed doctrines such as Platonic Realism, Essentialism and Idealism, including his important and famous theory of Forms and universals (he believed that the world we perceive around us is composed of mere representations or instances of the pure ideal Forms, which had their own existence elsewhere, an idea. The history of philosophy is the study of philosophical ideas and concepts through time. Issues specifically related to history of philosophy might include (but are not limited to): How can changes in philosophy be accounted for historically? What drives the development of thought in its historical context? To what degree can philosophical texts from prior historical eras be understood even today? Philosophy of history is the philosophical study of history and its discipline. The term was coined by French philosopher Voltaire. In contemporary philosophy a distinction has developed between speculative philosophy of history and critical philosophy of history, now referred to as analytic. The former questions the meaning and purpose of the historical process whereas the latter studies the foundations and implications of history and the historical method. The names of these are derived from C. D...