

The History of Philosophy as a Discipline

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THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AS A DISCIPLINE*

THE history of philosophy is the subject of a discipline of its own. Its aim is to reconstruct the history of philosophy in such a way that we can understand why philosophy got started in the first place and why it evolved in the way it did, up to and including the present day. For lack of another name, this discipline itself, just like its subject, gets called the "history of philosophy," too. Little thought has been given to the nature of the history of philosophy as a discipline. As a result, there is a good amount of confusion, not only as to what historians of philosophy try to do, but also as to how they ought to go about doing it. It would even seem that some of the historians' own work reflects such confusion. Hence, it seems appropriate to try to clarify, as well as we can, what a historian of philosophy is attempting to do.

Part of the confusion seems to be due to a misleading ambiguity in the term 'history of philosophy'. Historically it has been used in two rather different ways, each of which corresponds to a very different tradition of treating the history of philosophy, both of which persist to the present day but tend to get conflated.

From roughly the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, we find treatises with the title "History of Philosophy." Perhaps the earliest of these is Georg Horn's *Historia Philosophica* (Leiden, 1655); the most famous clearly is Jacob Brucker's *Historia Critica Philosophiae* (Leipzig, 1742–1767). If we look at these treatises, we are surprised to find that they are not histories in our sense at all; they do not try to trace the development of philosophy from its beginnings; they do not even follow the chronological order. They show themselves to stand in a much older tradition that goes back to antiquity, namely, the doxographical tradition. Almost from the beginning, certainly from Aristotle onward, there have been philosophers who have studied the history of philosophy for philosophical reasons. They were interested in philosophical views or positions of the past, because they thought that at least some of them were still worth philosophical consideration, perhaps even true in some im-

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portant regard, but perhaps also just false, yet false in an interesting, revealing, paradigmatic way. There was also the widespread philosophical conviction that there is a basic set of philosophical questions and that it might be philosophically worthwhile to scan the history of philosophy systematically for different answers to these questions. It was one or another version of this assumption, usually some form of eclecticism, which inspired the earlier large-scale systematic treatments of the history of philosophy, e.g., Diogenes Laertius's *Lives* in antiquity, and, with it as a model, the early modern treatments which, from some point in the seventeenth century onward, came to be called "histories of philosophy." When at the end of the eighteenth century Kant talks about historians of philosophy, what he has in mind still are philosophical doxographers of this kind, rather than historians in the sense I am interested in.

But toward the end of the eighteenth century, a very different tradition emerges. Meiners's history of 1786 seems to be the first to adopt a chronological disposition, and in the next decade appear, in rapid sequence, the histories of Tiedemann (1791 ff.), Buhle (1796), and Tennemann (1798 ff.), which make it their aim to trace the development of the history of philosophy from its beginnings to the present day.

As opposed to their doxographical predecessors, these histories originally are written out of the conviction that the philosophical positions of the past are no longer worth considering philosophically, that they are out of date; if they are still worth considering at all, it is because they constitute the steps through which we historically arrived at our present philosophical position. Thus, they are still histories written from a philosophical point of view, in fact from a particular philosophical position; and they regard the past, the history of philosophy, as leading up to this position. They are sometimes written to show how the given position is the result of a long historical process in the course of which we have come nearer and nearer to the truth.

But it is easy to see that the enterprise of reconstructing the development of philosophy, though originally inspired by such philosophical convictions and interests, in fact does not rest on them. And so, in the course of the nineteenth century, we see how these philosophical assumptions about the history of philosophy get shelved by historians like Eduard Zeller. What emerges is a discipline that, with the tools of the historian, tries to do no more, but also no less, than to reconstruct historically the development of philosophy. It does not

make any assumptions as to whether the views of the past are still worth considering philosophically or not; it certainly does not proceed selecting those views or positions of the past which might be thought to be of continued philosophical interest; it does not itself take a philosophical position and tries to reconstruct the past as leading up to it; it does not see itself at all as serving the interests of philosophy, or any other discipline, for that matter. It is history of philosophy in this sense with which I am concerned, rather than with the very different enterprise of history of philosophy in the philosophical, doxographical tradition.

I have no objection to a philosophically oriented study of the history of philosophy in the doxographical tradition, though I find that the use of the word 'history' for this sort of study is somewhat misleading. If I insist on the distinction it is because it is often overlooked, especially by philosophers, though there is a fundamental difference, both in principle and in practice, and because I think that the kind of history of philosophy in the doxographical tradition which philosophers continue to practice to the present day, a study which imposes our philosophical views and interests on the history of philosophy, ultimately presupposes the second kind of history of philosophy, i.e., a study of the history of philosophy in its own right, on its own terms, quite independently of our philosophical views, interests, and standards. And this for the following reasons: it had always been, in fact, though not in principle, a weakness of the doxographical tradition to underrate the enormous difficulties involved in precisely identifying a view of the past, especially of the more distant past, and in representing it in such a way as to make it accessible to philosophical consideration in terms of the contemporary debate and to comparison with other contemporary views. Once we become aware of the enormous difficulty, we have to make a choice. We can choose, perfectly legitimately, to forego the enormous difficulties involved in identifying a view, say, of Aristotle's, by settling for a view which, if not Aristotle's itself, seems to be a view very much like it and, in any case, is a view of philosophical interest. But, equally legitimately, we may choose not to compromise and to insist on identifying Aristotle's view as well as this is possible. But, if we do opt for the latter, I think we have to study the history of philosophy on its own terms. For we will only be able to identify confidently a view of the past, if we have a thorough understanding of the historical context in which it was held, an understanding of which views were available in this context and which not. And we will not have this kind of grasp on the immediate context, unless we have a solid grasp on a fairly large context. And this larger context inevita-

bly will be crucially characterized by many details that are of no concern to the philosopher, either because they are not philosophical in the first place, or because they are of no philosophical interest to us. After all, most of the history of philosophy is of no or little philosophical interest to us. Hence, the only way, it seems to me, to get a sufficiently adequate grasp on the historical context in which a view was held, to allow us to identify a view with sufficient reliability, is to study the history of philosophy in its own right, including all those details which are of little or no philosophical interest or even unphilosophical in character, rather than to study selectively just those parts of the history which to us still seem to be of philosophical interest. So, even if in the end we are interested in the history of philosophy for philosophical reasons, we may decide that these interests are best served by a study of the history which is independent of these interests. After all, we may come to believe that Aristotle's or Thomas's actual views are likely to be a lot more interesting philosophically than their doxographical substitutes. Once we have such a historical study we are in a much better position to judge whether philosophical positions of the past continue to be of philosophical interest or not.

Perhaps this notion of the history of philosophy as a discipline in its own right will become clearer if we look at how a historian of philosophy, as opposed to a philosopher interested in the history of philosophy for philosophical reasons, will treat a view of the past. Let us assume that the view, along with the reasons given for it, has been correctly identified. Now, the philosopher will be interested in the view and the reasons given for it as such. He will ask questions like: Is the view true, reasonable, plausible, possible, or not? Are the reasons offered for it adequate or even conclusive? Which other reasons could one advance in favor of the view, which ones do speak against it? The historian, on the other hand, is interested, not in the view and the reasons as such, but in the historical fact that a certain person in a certain historical context held this view and gave these reasons for it. The questions he will ask are not whether the view is true or the reasons are adequate, but rather whether the view would have seemed to be true or plausible at the time, whether at that point in the past the reasons offered would have been taken to be adequate or conclusive.

To put the matter differently: if we try to understand why a contemporary of ours holds a certain view, we look at the reasons he offers for this view. Depending on whether these reasons seem good reasons or not, we think we have understood why he holds this view. If the reasons are perfectly good reasons, we will be inclined to think

that he holds the view for these reasons; if not, we know that we have to look for a more complicated explanation of why he holds the view. But, if we consider somebody in a very different historical context, the situation is rather different. What matters in that case is whether the reasons offered would have counted as good reasons at the time or not. For though the reasons he offers, by our light, are excellent reasons, it may turn out that at the time they could not reasonably have been regarded as good reasons. So we cannot explain his belief just in terms of these reasons, though they seem adequate to us. Or suppose the reasons offered are bad reasons, so bad that nobody nowadays would hold the view on the basis of them; hence, if nowadays somebody gave them as his reasons for the view, we would be inclined to think that the explanation for his holding the view must lie somewhere else. But it might very well be the case that, in the historical context we are considering, this line of reasoning would have appeared perfectly adequate and persuasive. So the historian will explain somebody's holding a view in the past not with reference, e.g., to what would seem to us to be a perfectly adequate line of argument, but to a line of argument which would have seemed perfectly adequate then. But this means that he now has to go on to explain why this line of reasoning would have seemed perfectly adequate then, if we are to understand why the philosopher in question held this view for these reasons. So the historian does try to understand and to explain, as far as he can, the philosophical views of the past in terms of philosophical arguments and philosophical considerations. But they are the philosophical considerations of that time, rather than ours. In this sense the historian explains the facts of his history out of their historical context.

It might be worthwhile to look at this a bit more closely. Within the relevant historical context, we have to distinguish between the narrower context, which is roughly something like the philosophy of the time, and the larger historical context, which is the rest of the culture of the time, which includes the social, political, economical, and religious conditions and whatever else may be relevant, for instance, the state of the sciences. We have to make this distinction for various reasons. One is the following: as we said earlier, the reasons advanced for a view may be so inadequate, even in terms of the philosophy of the time, that we come to think that the view was not held for this reason, but for some extra-philosophical reason. In this case the historian has to explain the fact that the view was held in terms of the larger historical context.

But the distinction is also important for the following reason.

Philosophy is an ongoing enterprise with its own standards of what is acceptable and what not, with its own standards, e.g., as to which line of reasoning is acceptable in support of a view, as to what counts as a reasonable view. Perhaps these standards change over time, as philosophy develops on the basis of purely philosophical considerations. Perhaps it also is the case that these standards change over time under the pressure of the larger context, e.g., the attraction science exercises. But, however much the philosophy of a time may be embedded in the rest of the culture of the time, at each time these standards and rules of the subject itself offer it a considerable amount of autonomy from the rest of the culture, though this autonomy may be larger or smaller at different times.

Now, at least in our tradition, it is part of the enterprise of philosophy to hold views for reasons that are adequate by the standards of the enterprise. And the autonomy of the subject is reflected precisely by the fact that, by and large, if philosophers do claim to hold a certain view for certain reasons, they actually do hold it for these reasons, because they assume these reasons to be adequate by the standards of the enterprise. Hence, however much other explanations in terms of the larger context may be available, it is the task of the historian of philosophy to explain philosophical views or positions, as far as possible, in terms of the philosophical considerations that were taken to support them. Perhaps we may call a history that follows this principle an "internal" history of philosophy, since it explains the development of philosophy, as far as possible, in terms of considerations internal to philosophy. But even such an internal history will have to rely, again and again, on factors other than philosophical considerations. In fact, given how embedded philosophy is in the rest of the culture, both at a time and through time, one also could write an external history of philosophy. Its lack of detail when it comes to particular philosophical views or positions would reveal the degree of autonomy philosophy has enjoyed.

We now have a very schematic idea of how a historian, out of the historical context in which a view was held, explains the fact that somebody held his view. But we can also faintly see in terms of this schema how the historian might explain the development of philosophy. For suppose the view in question is a new view, a relatively central view, and the reasons given for it at the time seem plausible, so that the view finds considerable acceptance. As a result the narrower historical context will change more or less significantly. And, as a result of this, the kinds of philosophical considerations which are

regarded as acceptable will change more or less significantly. So what the historian will look for are not new views that we find philosophically interesting, but new views whose appearance significantly changed the context. By explaining how they came to be held and how they affected the context, we will slowly get a picture of the development of philosophy which in no way depends on our philosophical views and interests. In fact, these themselves will be included in the picture. For the philosophical views of the present should allow for exactly the same kind of explanation as the views of the more recent or the more distant past, namely, in terms of a narrower and a larger historical context. And the narrower context will be explained, as usual, in terms of a change in context, due, e.g., to the appearance of new views or positions, against the background of which a view appears eminently reasonable.

That even the philosophy of the present should be accounted for in this way by the historian may strike us as curious, but it is just the result of assuming that the historian does not approach the history of philosophy as a philosopher with his own philosophical views and interests. The philosopher, of course, explains his views by explaining why they are true, and not by explaining why, given his historical context, he has them or takes them to be true.

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