

‘Glock on Analytic Philosophy and History’¹

Chapter four of Glock’s wide-ranging and incisive book *‘What is Analytic Philosophy?’*, which is entitled ‘History and Historiography’, explores the relationship between analytic philosophy and history. The chapter is presented as a critical examination of the idea that ‘analytic philosophy can be conceived by reference to time’ (89) since, the suggestion goes, ‘what sets analytic philosophy apart is its attitude to history’ (88). But the chapter is also a detailed exploration of a more general (philosophical) question: What attitude should philosophers take towards the history of philosophy, towards the history of ideas, and towards history in general? The answer favoured by Glock to that question is what he calls ‘weak historicism’ which, he claims, happens to be the attitude taken by most analytic philosophers.

Glock begins by noting that analytic philosophy has often been accused of disregarding historical issues but, he contends, the accusation lacks bite, ‘not *just* because analytic philosophers take a greater interest in the past than is commonly assumed, but also because their neglect of *some* historical issues is not the mortal sin their critics make it out to be’ (89).

Glock goes on, as he often does in this book, to clarify terminology and draw distinctions. He explains that he will use the label ‘historicism’ to cover any ‘position that promotes historical thinking in philosophy and warns against ignoring or distorting the past’ (89) but emphasises the need to distinguish different types within that class. So, there is *intrinsic* historicism, which maintains that ‘proper philosophy is *ipso facto* historical’ (90); *instrumental* historicism, for which the study of the past is a necessary means to ‘ends which themselves are not historical in nature’ (*ibid.*); and *weak* historicism, which holds that studying the past is useful but not indispensable for the proper pursuit of philosophy.

In addition, and cutting across those positions, Glock notes that analytic philosophy has been charged with two history-related sins: *historiophobia* – a tendency to ignore the past; and *anachronism* – a tendency to distort it. His verdict is that these charges, especially the first, are fundamentally unfounded because analytic philosophers have, by-and-large, actually endorsed weak historicism. Moreover, the charges, he argues, seem both warranted and serious to some detractors of analytic philosophy because they, the detractors, tend to endorse either intrinsic or instrumental historicism. However, he says, they are wrong to do so, for ‘[i]ntrinsic historicism is misguided, and the case for instrumental historicism remains unproven’ (90).

Glock deals with the position he calls ‘intrinsic historicism’ deftly and convincingly. Intrinsic historicists, both those who hold that proper philosophy is continuous with the natural sciences (Krüger, MacIntyre), and those who reject that claim (Gadamer, Rorty), fail to prove that philosophy is inherently historical – a conversation with tradition – as opposed to *a priori*. As Glock points out, the problems of philosophy cannot be solved by ‘recording their history’ (96) any more than they can be solved by observation or experiment. And the actual practice of philosophers, including the ‘great dead’ with whom intrinsic historicists urge us to

¹ I should like to thank John Hyman, Ray Monk and Aaron Ridley for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

engage in dialogue, attests to this fact. There is, Glock adds, something defeatist about this historicist position, for endorsing it requires us to abandon ‘the aspiration to tackle philosophical problems by way of either solution or dissolution’ (98) – an aspiration that many will feel amounts to abandoning the practice of philosophy altogether.

Instrumental historicism fares no better under Glock’s scrutiny. Most of those who endorse this position (Williams and Taylor, for example) conceive of philosophy as a ‘special kind of *self-understanding*’ (97) which involves a clear articulation of the essential aspects of our conceptual framework. And since they, unlike Kant, do not take this framework to be an immutable structure, they think that no proper philosophical understanding can be achieved without examining either the history of the different ways in which our framework has been characterized (Taylor), or the historical development of that framework, that is, the historical development of our concepts (Williams).

According to the first suggestion, in order to be in a position to challenge the *status quo* philosophers need to know the past – for only thus do they become aware that the *status quo* is one among several possible characterizations of our framework. But this position, Glock argues, conflates the need for an awareness of (the possibility of) *alternative* philosophical characterizations with the need for an awareness of *past* philosophical characterizations. Besides identifying this mistake, Glock diagnoses an infinite regress lurking in this view. For the argument ‘assumes that one can only overcome a philosophical position A_n if one is familiar with a prior alternative A_{n-1} ’ (99). But this, Glock says, cannot be right; otherwise it would be impossible for anyone to overcome any philosophical position – which is patently false, for the history of philosophy includes overcomings of this kind.

One may feel that some wiggle room for the instrumental historicist remains. For the instrumental historicist may argue that, in some cases – perhaps at the beginning of history – there need only be two positions that have gradually (historically) become sufficiently differentiated from each other to provide the philosopher with the requisite awareness of the possibility of alternatives. These positions may be sufficiently different to count as genuine alternatives without that being the result of the one having been an orthodoxy that the other overthrew. If that is right, a philosopher with awareness of such alternative possibilities would be in a position to overcome the conception that is the *status quo* for him. But this defence, even if successful, is small change for instrumental historicism since, as Glock emphasises, everything about the practice of philosophy that this form of historicism claims to be conditional on awareness of historical variety is, at most, conditional on awareness of the possibility of variety – and this awareness may be obtained by surveying actual synchronic as well as diachronic variety or, even worse for the historicist, by considering mere possibilities.

A related historicist position is held by some Nietzscheans who, like Williams seemed to do in places, advocate the widespread application of the genealogical method in philosophy. Glock charges them with falling prey to the genetic fallacy, ‘the mistake of deducing claims about the *validity* of a theory or the *content* of a concept from information about its historical origins, including information about the cause of its emergence’ (101). Of course this is a charge that Williams himself was aware of and attempted to deflect but Glock argues persuasively that Williams only succeeds in showing that, for *some* beliefs and practices, their origin may be relevant to their justification. It doesn’t show that in philosophy *in general* the exploration of genesis and the assessment of validity go hand in hand. Moreover, Glock points out, *which* beliefs and practices fall in the category for which genealogy is relevant is determined by a-historical, *a priori* philosophical reflection.

One more variant of historicism is subjected to critical examination, namely, ‘historical relativism’, which holds that ‘different philosophical positions are incommensurable: they cannot be assessed objectively from a neutral standpoint’(107). The positions comes in two forms: semantic and epistemic. Glock gives a series of arguments why this position is untenable in either form. Among other things, the position is self-undermining for, if there was indeed semantic incommensurability, then, the attempt to study the past would be impossible.² Moreover, as often happens with such extreme positions, it implicitly recommends attitudes to philosophy (typically, the need to refrain from engaging in it) that its advocates fail to follow. Its epistemic counterpart depends on a false assumption: that objective philosophical assessment requires, as Rorty seems to claim, a way of ‘stepping outside our belief system and conceptual apparatus as a whole and comparing it with reality’(108). And to compound the troubles that afflict this position, on examination it turns out that historic relativists of both complexions ‘incline towards circular reasoning’ for, on the one hand ‘relativism is supposed to be a lesson from history; on the other hand that lesson will only be revealed to those who approach history in the right relativistic spirit’(109).

So Glock makes a good negative case for the claim that these kinds of historicism are confused or untenable. Some positive arguments for the answer he favours, namely weak historicism, are given in the final assessment of instrumental historicism, where it is said that several of the points raised by the latter suggest that the former is right: studying the past is not essential but is certainly advantageous to us in our philosophical pursuits, which is precisely what weak historicism says.

Nonetheless, for all the force, scholarship and wit of Glock’s arguments in this chapter, there are two aspects of the picture he paints about which I have some doubts. First, while I am largely convinced by his criticism of the alternative positions he examines, weak historicism seems to me too weak. Second, the claim that analytic philosophy has not been characterised by some form of historiophobia seems to require qualification. Let me say something about each of these doubts in turn.

The idea that knowledge of the history of philosophy is advantageous to our philosophising is surely uncontroversial. Engaging seriously and critically with the texts and arguments of past philosophers can help us in all sorts of ways. It helps us to understand better the philosophical questions we are engaged with: by comparing our questions with those that exercised philosophers in the past, noting the similarities and differences between them, and paying attention to the presuppositions and wider concerns that formed the background against which they asked their questions, we can understand our own questions better, sharpen them up, and gain awareness and better understanding of the presuppositions and wider concerns that form the background against which we are asking them, and thus acquire the distance that makes criticism easier. (This kind of exercise is aided by an approach to the history of philosophy that Glock says is favoured by the majority of analytic historians, ‘what Passmore labels “problematic histories” or the “history of problems” approach ... Problematic historians asks questions like: Why were people exercised by certain problems, why did they utilize certain

² In this, Glock is in agreement with some notable contemporary historians of philosophy with an analytic training. John Marenbon, for example, notes the need to make the arguments of Mediaeval philosophers comprehensible by translating them into terms that a modern reader can grasp. He acknowledges that ‘this act of translation can become a process of transformation’ which runs the risk of betraying the original author’s intentions. But, he concludes ‘the historian can avoid the risks of translating material from the past only by abandoning the attempt to understand it’(Marenbon 1993: ix)

methods of tackling them, and why did they find certain solutions attractive?’(106).) Besides, critical knowledge of the great figures of the past helps us to avoid their mistakes and absorb their insights, at least when we have enough philosophical acuity to spot them. These reasons to take a serious interest in the history of the subject are consistent with remaining alive to the distinction between philosophical and exegetical questions, and the realisation that addressing and solving the second is no substitute for addressing and solving the first, even when it is a help to it.

What is harder to assess is the second part of weak historicism: that studying the past is not essential to philosophy. Without wanting to reintroduce any of the historicist positions persuasively dispatched by Glock, nor to claim that philosophy is anything other than *a priori*, I want to question the idea that an interest in the past is dispensable. It seems true that it is possible to do philosophy without concerning oneself with *remote* parts of the history of the subject, or with the details of the historical development of a problem or a position, or with the solution to any number of exegetical problems concerning a particular philosopher – that is, without being a historian of philosophy. But it is not clear that one can really do philosophy without studying, in the sense of engaging at a deep level with, at least some parts of the history of the subject. Even Wittgenstein, who disavowed knowledge or interest in the history of the subject, was consciously influenced by, and responding to, past philosophy, even if it was in the recent past, such as the thought of, among others, Schopenhauer, Frege and Russell – and, for the things about which he remained mostly silent, Kierkegaard. And in perhaps a less self-conscious way he was also responding to others: the private language argument is regarded by many, including Glock (98), as the most effective demolition of the Cartesian picture of a private inner realm. Wittgenstein may not have had Descartes explicitly in his sights when he developed the argument; nonetheless it is to Descartes that we owe the picture in all its compelling and alluring force. As has been noted (Hacking 1984, mentioned in Glock, 109) Descartes speaks very directly to contemporary undergraduates; but that is no coincidence, for as Kenny says, most educated people in the West have been profoundly influenced by Descartes’ conception of the mind (Kenny 1989: 2). So, however implicitly, Wittgenstein was responding to Descartes. Perhaps all that this amounts to is the truism that philosophical thinking does not occur in a vacuum and that, more or less deliberately and explicitly, and with various degrees of awareness that they are doing so, philosophers are always reacting to the problems, positions, concepts and arguments of their predecessors by challenging, refining, improving, or overthrowing them. So it might be said that, with various degrees of explicitness, doing philosophy involves engaging with its past.

There also seems to be some truth in the suggestion that analytic philosophy, at least in its inception, was characterised by a tendency to neglect or disregard the history of philosophy as a whole. At any rate, this seems true of the attitudes of many of the figures that Glock presents as paradigms of analytic philosophy. As Glock himself says, the Vienna Circle, the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* and plausibly also the author of the *Tractatus*, and perhaps the Oxford ‘ordinary language’ philosophers as well, saw ‘the history of philosophy ... primarily as a history of nonsense or mistakes’(91). Perhaps Russell cannot be accused of ignoring the past: after all, he wrote a history of Western philosophy. But his motivation in doing so was not to aid his philosophising, and his treatment of some of its main figures and their views and arguments was cavalier. Even Ryle’s remarks that the ‘figures of the past “sometimes said significant things” and that they should be treated “more like colleagues than like pupils”’ (94) seems a little half-hearted – not quite Newton’s: ‘if I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants’ (a phrase which, incidentally, is attributed to the twelve-century neo-Platonist philosopher Bernard de Chartres, who used it to describe his relationship to Greek philosophers).

To be sure, things changed and, as Glock notes, after the 1960s analytic philosophy became more interested in the history of the subject, ‘prompting von Wright to speak of a “retrospective turn”’ (92). Von Wright’s phrase is significant both because it suggests that there had indeed been something of a neglect of the explicit study of the history of philosophy before then, and because it prompts the question: why this ‘retrospective turn’? The answer is complex, but part of it is that this was always the standard approach and the attitude that prevailed in the previous couple of decades was the exception.

In showing that analytic philosophy is not historiophobic, Glock claims that analytic interest in the history of philosophy now extends to all periods. But this seems less true of mediaeval philosophy, which has been the period most assiduously neglected by analytic philosophers. The neglect is reflected in the syllabi of analytic philosophy departments, at least in the UK, where the history of philosophy begins with Plato and Aristotle, with an occasional mention of the Pre-Socratics, and continues with Descartes. (Glock’s own excellent ‘Historical Survey’ illustrates the point). The revival of interest in the Medieval period was partly due, ironically, to the influence of a handful of Wittgensteinians (e.g. Anscombe, Geach and Kenny) with an interest in Scholastic Aristotelian philosophy. There is a further irony in the fact that medieval philosophy has been neglected by analytic philosophers because there are striking similarities between the two traditions, as the historian of philosophy, John Marenbon, notes:

Philosophy now (in the English-speaking countries) is an academic discipline, pursued by a small number of highly trained specialists in university departments. In the latter Middle Ages, too, sophisticated abstract thought was conducted by masters of arts and theology in the universities – an intellectual elite that had received a lengthy education. (Marenbon 1993: 86).

And the similarity is not restricted to the context in which philosophy was carried out but it extends to method and topics, for example, the importance placed on logic and language, and the reliance on technical terms. Despite highlighting these similarities, Marenbon is aware of the danger of exaggerating them and ‘making anachronistic assumptions about the identity of the problems discussed’ (*op cit*, 89) by medieval and analytic philosophers. Nonetheless, he identifies some areas of common interest to both: ‘for example, topics in the philosophy of mind and action such as knowledge, memory, emotion and intention or topics in philosophical logic such as signification, self-reference and modality’ (*op cit*, 90).

The neglect of the Mediaeval period is to be explained by a variety of factors, including a lack of familiarity with its complex technical terminology. In addition, the fact that most Mediaeval philosophers were theologians, and that they operated within tight doctrinal constraints is mistakenly thought to diminish the interest and value of their work. This was certainly Russell’s view. Commenting on Aquinas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles*, he says:

He wrote another book, *Summa Theologiae*, of almost equal importance, but of somewhat less interest to us because less designed to use arguments not assuming in advance the truth of Christianity (Russell 1946: 419).

Since many of Aquinas’s disagreements in the *ST* concerned the views of philosophers and theologians who also assumed the truth of Christianity, and since many of his arguments relied on Aristotle, who didn’t, this remark suggests that Russell simply did not understand the nature of Aquinas’s project. Russell also says that in Aquinas ‘the appeal to reason is, in a sense, insincere, since the conclusion to be reached is fixed in advance’ (Russell 1946: 426),

and so, he concludes, there is ‘little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas’, because ‘he does not set out to follow wherever the argument may lead’ (Russell 1946: 427). These remarks, apart from betraying an implausibly idealistic conception of rational thought, sit a little uncomfortably with some other remarks by Russell, for example: ‘I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don’t like it’.

Ultimately, the retrospective turn in analytic philosophy has surely resulted from a gradual reawakening to the fact that the philosophers of the past, both recent and remote (and that includes ‘Continental’ philosophers), have much to offer us. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are often responding to their problems, insights and mistakes and therefore, the better we know and understanding those, the better off we will be; and, often, it is only ignorance and prejudice that prevents us from appreciating this fact. This seems to favour a stronger form of historicism than that accepted by Glock: that, while it may be possible to pursue philosophical questions without detailed study of the history of philosophy, it is impossible to do philosophy without in fact engaging with that history and, therefore, it would be folly – and perhaps worse – to attempt to do so without at least *some* serious attempt to understand it.

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