

Can Historical Work be Systematic? Some Remarks on the Distinction between History of Philosophy and Systematic Philosophy

Andree Hahmann

Department of Philosophy, Tsinghua University, Beijing

ABSTRACT

In philosophy, the distinction between the history of philosophy and systematic philosophy has a great influence not only on the organization of teaching, but also on appointments and research funding. Above all, however, it is decisive for the self-understanding of philosophy. In recent years, the significance and function of the history of philosophy has been the subject of controversial debate. After being more or less ignored in analytic philosophy for a long time, there has been an increasing turn to the history of philosophy in recent years. Some authors even speak of a historical turn in analytic philosophy. Since the 1980s there have been growing attempts to theorize the different approaches to the history of philosophy and their presuppositions. Another focus has been on the relationship between the history of philosophy and systematic research. Numerous authors have argued for the importance of historical research for systematic philosophical research or for philosophical education. In this talk, I will be concerned with the distinction between history of philosophy and systematic philosophy itself. I am interested in how exactly this distinction is justified. So my question is: what exactly distinguishes work in the history of philosophy from systematic research? I go through the criteria proposed for this distinction and show that they are often problematic and unclear. I first address the historical distance of the authors, the significance of philosophical discourse, the question of the object of historical research and its unique method. Originality and systematicity turn out to be two essential distinguishing criteria. Ultimately, the common distinction between primary and secondary literature is also related to this. However, using two historical examples, I argue that these criteria are problematic and can hardly justify the wide-ranging distinction. In the third section, I discuss the historical origins of the division between the history of philosophy and systematic philosophy. I argue that the notions of originality and systematicity that emerged in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century are crucial in this respect, and that these notions are still effective today, albeit unreflectively.

KEYWORDS

Methodology; Metaphilosophy; Originality; Aristotle; Alexander of Aphrodisias

* This text is a moderately revised transcript of the first lecture presented to the Anglophone Beijing Colloquium in Philosophy, including parts of the subsequent discussion, held on 10 April 2023 at the Institute of Foreign Philosophy at Peking University.

My talk will address a pivotal division within philosophy that significantly shapes contemporary philosophical inquiry: the distinction between the history of philosophy and systematic philosophy. This division plays a substantial role in various domains:

In Germany, for instance, academic appointments within philosophical departments and institutes often align with this division. Thus, there is (at best) a professor of the history of philosophy and professorships of the various systematic areas of philosophy, namely, practical and theoretical philosophy with their subdisciplines. This division also determines the philosophical curricula and consequently philosophical teaching. There are introductions to the history of philosophy, courses on philosophical classics, the so-called canon of philosophy, and seminars on systematic questions.

Research funding in Germany is organized accordingly. At the DFG, for example, decisions and the allocation of funds are carried out by units that distinguish between the research areas of theoretical philosophy, practical philosophy, and finally the history of philosophy.

However, upon closer examination, this division reveals various challenges. I will highlight some of these issues, recognizing that my exploration remains ongoing and that conclusive answers may not yet be available. My primary aim is to illuminate the complexities associated with this distinction and foster a deeper understanding of its implications.

1 Object and Method of the History of Philosophy

If one were to ask about the understanding of the history of philosophy and of research in the history of philosophy, one might suggest that it is some kind of secondary literature on the work of historical authors. This implies that the history of philosophy is characterized by a specific object, namely the historical author and their work, and a particular form, as secondary literature.

In the next step, one could distinguish between different types of access to the historical author. Current research distinguishes between the history of ideas or problems, internal or external approaches, contextualising or hermetic readings, and more.

In the following discussion, my focus is not on the different philosophical approaches and their connection to systematic research, but rather on the criteria that define a philosophical work as such as a work in the history of philosophy. Specifically, I aim to identify the characteristics that distinguish a systematic philosophical work from a work of history of philosophy.

Let us return to our initial understanding and examine the object and form of the history of philosophy more closely. It is said that history of philosophy deals with a historical work or author. But what makes an author a historical author? The obvious assumption is that there is a historical distance to their work that renders the study of it historical. The difficulty, then, is to determine at what point a philosophical author or work is to be considered historical: The discussion of McDowell's *Mind and World* is likely to be regarded as a systematic work by most philosophers. McDowell is alive. The book is based on the Locke Lectures that McDowell gave at Oxford in 1991 and was published in 1996. Although *Mind and World* may not be at the cutting edge of philosophy of mind, it remains a significant contribution to the field. It is widely acknowledged that engaging with McDowell's claims remains systematically relevant. This can be more challenging when dealing with Quine's *Word and Object* or Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, as both authors have been deceased for many years and their works were produced decades, almost a century, ago. Regarding Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, it is commonly agreed that it is a work of the history of philosophy and that the study of this book is driven by a historical interest.

Is it possible to distinguish between historical and systematic research based on the time when the work was written? Or does this determination depend on whether the author is still alive and able to defend their work? This could be a clear and unambiguous criterion. Therefore, only

contributions to an ongoing discussion that address the statements of living authors can be considered as a systematic philosophical contribution. Hanno Sauer (2022; 2023) seems to have had this in mind in his studies of the usefulness of the history of philosophy. However, upon closer examination, this criterion appears to be absurd. According to this criterion, systematic contributions to current discussions become historical objects with the death of the author. What is more, it would follow that the entire discussion of the issues raised by the author becomes a historical debate as soon as the author dies.

I believe that the classification of a work as history of philosophy is not solely determined by its temporal distance, but rather by its relevance to current philosophical discourse. What do I mean by philosophical discourse? A philosophical discourse is defined by a set of common basic assumptions or concepts that shape the context of a discussion. This means that the objects that are acceptable for philosophical discussion, as well as the range of possible answers, are predetermined by the basic concepts and presumptions that prevail in philosophical discourse. The same applies to other sciences. Every science presupposes a set of basic concepts or axiomatic assumptions that make research in the respective sciences possible and also determine them in detail.

However, referencing other sciences such as physics or biology in philosophy can be problematic as it may suggest a comparable progress in philosophy. Some colleagues assume that there is such progress in philosophy. For instance, the development of logic from classical Aristotelian to post-Fregean logic may be seen as such a progress. This assumption implies that philosophical systems or thoughts that do not incorporate the innovations of logic should be deemed obsolete. Therefore, one could argue that studying philosophers who predate Frege is akin to examining Galen's four-juice doctrine in medicine, which is clearly outdated and refuted by facts.

However, it is not necessary to go to such lengths to acknowledge the relevance of philosophical discourse. It is clear that a common philosophical language is used within a discourse, and that common philosophical problems arise from shared basic assumptions. The approaches to solving these problems must be presented in a specific way, both methodologically and terminologically, in order to be recognized as effective solutions. Hanno Sauer provides a good example of the permissible answers to questions in practical philosophy:

"[...] in ethics, it is often important not to assign disproportionate testimonial weight to people of which we have good reasons to suspect that they harbored deeply objectionable attitudes or publicly expressed moral beliefs we have reason to deem unjustified and/or morally odious." (Sauer 2022, 15)

Mr. Sauer also gives us historical examples of such authors who do not share these generally accepted ideas:

"Plato advocated abolishing the family, violently if need be; Aristotle defended (a version of) slavery as natural; Locke advocated religious toleration, only to exclude atheists from the social contract; Kant argued that masturbation is one of the gravest moral transgressions there is [...]." (Sauer 2022, 15)

Why their positions are thus excluded from the discourse is also explained:

"In general, if we find out that a person holds monstrous moral beliefs like that, we tend not to listen to them at all, much less treat them as experts on what's good or bad. If we found out that a person was unable to grasp basic moral truths and didn't understand why, for instance, cooperation is supposed to be good or why pain is supposed to be bad, we would assign no testimonial weight to that person's moral beliefs. Why should moral beliefs that we would treat as disqualifying for someone alive today not be treated as similarly disqualifying for someone who happens not to be alive anymore?" (Sauer 2022, 16)

Sauer argues that authors must share certain assumptions for their contributions to be heard in a philosophical discourse. Those who question the objective status of prevailing values or press for the justification of these presuppositions (perhaps because they cannot readily see these objective

values as necessary in morality) are excluded from the discourse.

However, if this requirement is to be accepted in current discourse, it follows almost naturally that most historical philosophers, but especially the ancient ones, must be excluded from the community of recognized contributions. This is because historical authors often challenge commonly accepted truths. In other words, historical authors are not attuned to the moral facts that Sauer and others require as a prerequisite for participation in contemporary moral philosophy.

It is important to note that a philosophical discourse is not only historically determined, but also spatially determined. Similar limitations apply to different views from philosophers who do not share the same moral perspective due to a different cultural background.

Returning to the question of criteria, a philosophical work becomes historical according to this approach if it is based on assumptions that are no longer shared. The work then belongs to a different and earlier philosophical discourse. However, it is still somehow connected to the current discourse. But in order for it to speak in that discourse, a work of translation is required. The procedure of translation is something I will return to below.

A closely related feature of our assessment of philosophical work is the way in which a given text is approached. Specifically, the attitude with which a text is studied. An indirect approach to a philosophical problem involves aiming to understand what is said in the text. Therefore, to determine what Wittgenstein intended to say with the *Tractatus*, that is, if we want to understand the relationship between the second and third sentences and his contemporary theories that Wittgenstein draws upon in his text, then we have a historical approach. However, if we incorporate Wittgenstein's later ideas on private language into current discussions, view them as a significant contribution to ongoing debates, and compare his arguments with current positions, then our work would be a systematic research contribution.

There are two objections to this view: Firstly, this characterization is not particularly clear either. In the second case, it is also necessary to understand Wittgenstein's intended meaning first. This means that even if one wants to use Wittgenstein's text as part of the current discussion, one must first understand exactly what Wittgenstein actually said.

Additionally, this would ultimately involve a two-stage process rather than a fundamental distinction between historical and systematic research. The first stage involves the pursuit of insight into the philosophical facts presented by Wittgenstein. During the second stage, a confrontation with the prevailing positions in the current discourse occurs.

At this stage, the significance of the philosophical discourse is once again evident. When dealing with an author who engages in the philosophical discourse or is at least more closely aligned with it, it becomes easier to translate the arguments into current philosophical terminology. This means presenting the classical author's ideas in a way that is easier to comprehend and engage in dialogue with other positions within the same discourse.

However, it is worth considering the impact of this model on the differentiation between systematic and historical research. If we view the initial stage, which is primarily focused on comprehending and understanding philosophical problems, as the historical aspect, then it appears that the historical component encompasses the actual philosophical work. In contrast, the second stage seems to involve the transfer of knowledge, whereby classical arguments are translated into contemporary philosophical discourse. However, it is noteworthy that the second part purports to address the things themselves, while the first part is considered a mere discussion of what others have already stated.

To avoid this difficulty, however, one could reply that good systematic research should be carried out in a purely original way, that is, without relying on an understanding of the positions of earlier philosophers. The focus should be solely on the problem at hand.

A well-known and effective example of focusing on the problem itself rather than on the views of

classical philosophers is Gettier's work on the nature of knowledge.¹ With just three concise essays, Edmund Gettier challenged the standard analysis of knowledge, making an undeniable impact on the development of epistemology in the latter half of the 20th century. However, as has been highlighted recently, this supposed standard analysis of knowledge lacks representation by any historical figure. It is true that shortly after the publication of the Gettier cases, the so-called historians of philosophy pointed out that Plato made a sharp distinction between knowledge and opinion. But their reservations had been overheard by the so-called systematic philosophers, and, as is now widely recognized, Plato's reasoning for making this distinction was sound. For according to Plato, knowledge can never arise from opinion, even with additional justifications, a position adopted by more and more contemporary epistemologists. It should be added, however, that this has been argued by most ancient and modern philosophers as well. Therefore, while Gettier may have not reinvented the wheel, he simply missed the point.

2 Alexander and Aristotle

In this section I will look more closely at what are considered the two primary criteria for systematic philosophy: originality and systematicity. A work in the history of philosophy is said to lack originality because it does not develop independent thoughts. Historians of philosophy reproduce what others have already said. Therefore, they are not interested in what is actually the case, but only in what Aristotle thinks about a fact. One writes about what others have written, which may seem less original than developing one's own thought.

The second point of criticism gives systematic philosophy its name: historians of philosophy often use the form of commentary, and a philosophical commentary usually follows the structure of the reference text, which does not have a systematic form. Without going into detail about what systematic form means, it is clear that a commentary does not develop its thoughts starting from the problem itself, but follows a reference text.

In what follows, I will use two examples to show that both criteria are at least questionable. First, I will use the example of the ancient philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias to illustrate that both original and systematic research can come in many different forms, but also in the form of a commentary. Alexander has been considered one of the most significant commentators on Aristotelian philosophy since antiquity. By late antiquity he had already acquired the epithet *exegete* or commentator. Alexander considers himself a faithful interpreter of Aristotelian philosophy, which he views as a unified and systematic whole that can provide answers to almost all philosophical questions. Alexander's systematic approach to the Aristotelian texts and resulting interpretations have led some modern scholars to believe that he may have been the creator of the Aristotelian system. In any case, it is certain that his commentaries are highly systematic.

Little is known about Alexander's life. Inferences can be drawn from a dedication of his work *On Fate* to the emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla as thanks for his appointment to a chair of philosophy. Presumably, this is one of the four chairs that Marcus Aurelius established in Athens around 176 AD.

Why do I include this historical information here? It is evident from historical circumstances that Alexander faced two philosophical movements during his time that Aristotle was not yet familiar with: Stoic and Epicurean philosophy. These two Hellenistic schools of philosophy dominated the philosophical debate for a long time. One of the most debated issues between these two schools is the question of the freedom of the will. This question arises from the premise that all events are necessitated by preceding causes. This notion is closely related to basic assumptions about the

¹ For the following argument, see in detail Antognazza 2015.

nature of bodies and higher-order laws of motion. Thus, the problem of determinism is a metaphysical problem because it results from a set of certain metaphysical assumptions. It is important to note that the problem of free will does not arise under Aristotelian presuppositions because Aristotle has a different metaphysics. However, this also means that there is no explicit discussion of this problem in Aristotle.

Therefore, it is evident that Alexander is required to address a contemporary issue that Aristotle did not encounter. To achieve this, he utilizes Aristotelian theory to expand on the original account. The outcome is a book called *De Fato* in which Alexander sets out, among other things, what Aristotle understands by fate, what freedom of will means for Aristotle, and how chance is understood by Aristotle. Of course, at no point does Aristotle offer a coherent discussion of free will. But Alexander finds in Aristotle the means to respond to the problems that arise in the changed philosophical discourse, that is, under changed philosophical preconditions.

Alexander follows a similar approach in other books, which extensively examine Stoic theory and fundamental Stoic assumptions. It is possible that Alexander played a significant role in the decline of Stoic philosophy from the 2nd century onwards. What is clear, however, is that in the centuries that followed, a culture of commentary on Aristotle's writings began to thrive and continued into the early modern period. This had a decisive impact on philosophical discourse.

Dorothea Frede (2023) highlights the significance of Alexander's book *De fato* as one of the most important ancient writings on the subject. She suggests that his positions are still relevant from a modern perspective. However, Mrs. Frede distinguishes between Alexander the commentator and Alexander the philosopher. She raises the question of his originality in his philosophical works, which, as Frede admits, is difficult to answer.

Answering this question in my second example is equally challenging. In 2021, David Charles, a British historian of philosophy, published a book titled *The Undivided Self* which is an interpretive commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*. However, it must be read in the context of modern philosophy of mind, which is primarily based on assumptions dating back to Descartes. Descartes' approach is characterized by two premises. Firstly, he believed that there are two fundamentally different kinds of substances: one extended and one thinking. Both substances exist independently of each other. Secondly, extended bodies obey the laws of motion, while thinking substances have conscious experience. The crucial question is: How can physical bodies, understood in themselves without explicit reference to the mental, be the basis of the mental? The answers to this question have dominated philosophical debate ever since. Either one side is reduced to the other: Accordingly, one obtains idealism or materialism, that is, one of the two substances is eventually set absolute. Alternatively, both substances are derived as attributes from another underlying substance.

Currently, there is a prevailing fear of idealistic theories, leading to the development of various materialistic perspectives, such as reductive materialism, non-reductive materialism, and functionalism.

It has been observed that Aristotle's philosophy of mind is not affected by Cartesian problems due to its different basic assumptions regarding the nature of bodies and laws of motion. Therefore, the short writing *De anima* has garnered significant attention. Charles's peculiar interpretation can be summarized in a few words by saying that for Aristotle all mental activities are "inseparably psycho-physical activities whose essential properties are inseparably psycho-physical" (2021, 2). This means that both mental phenomena themselves and physical processes mutually refer to each other by being incomplete in themselves. Consequently, the corresponding processes cannot be decomposed into two independent substances either.

I do not want to and cannot go into the details of Charles' approach here. Nor do I want to decide whether Charles succeeds or fails. Frankly, I believe that his interpretation is problematic. But

that doesn't change the point I want to make with this example. The *possibility* that Charles might be right is enough to show the importance of his interpretive, exegetical work for philosophical research. And we cannot rule out that Charles or any other similar approach might be correct. Thus, my only point is this: assuming Charles were right in his interpretation of the Aristotelian text, this would solve a philosophical problem that is almost 500 years old. However, this would also make all contributions to this problem meaningless. Countless philosophical theories, a whole area of contemporary philosophical debate would become irrelevant. We would be dealing with a gamechanger: The most important contribution to our philosophical understanding of the nature of the mind, which would render meaningless the accumulated work time of countless so-called systematic philosophers, would be contained in a commentary. But if this were correct, Charles' contribution would have a lasting impact on philosophical discourse itself, much as Alexander's commentaries have had a lasting impact on the history of philosophy.

Given this context, how should we evaluate David Charles' contribution to philosophy? Is his work *only* history of philosophy? Certainly, he would write history of philosophy. But is it really a true philosophical work? Is it also systematic or original?

3 Originality and Systematicity Historically Situated

In the final section, I will attempt to understand the problem we face historically. I will indicate that our two main criteria, namely, systematicity and originality, are themselves the offspring of a certain historical constellation. That is, these demands arose at a certain time, under certain conditions, and eventually acquired great importance.

It has been noted that after Alexander, the main activity of philosophy in Europe was the interpretation and commentary of Aristotle's philosophy. This trend was also observed in other parts of the world, such as Arabic philosophy, which was a significant source of inspiration for Western philosophy until the high Middle Ages. Commentaries were also written in Indian philosophy. The same is true of the Semitic-Jewish tradition. Commentaries play an important role in and for the Chinese philosophical tradition.

It is not entirely accurate to claim that commentaries in the Western tradition solely focused on Aristotle. In fact, even in late antiquity, there were instances of commentary on other authors. Neoplatonic philosophers, for example, commented on Plato, but also directed their attention towards Stoic philosophers like Epictetus. In medieval Christian philosophy, Augustine was a common subject of commentary. Even in modern times, commentary continues to play a significant role in philosophical production. Many important works of early modern Western philosophy are written in commentary form. One notable example is Pierre Gassendi, a contemporary of Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes. Gassendi primarily commented on the writings of Epicurus and attempted to reconcile them with the scientific discoveries of his time. Spinoza wrote a commentary on Descartes, and Leibniz's most important work is likely his commentary on John Locke. Even in the 18th century, there were significant and influential commentaries. Kant explicitly cites Moses Mendelssohn's commentary on Plato's *Phaedo* in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. However, the most important commentary is likely Christian Garve's *Notes on Cicero's De officiis*, published in two volumes. Garve wrote commentaries on Ferguson, Cicero, and Aristotle and was among the most widely read and influential philosophers of 18th-century Germany. However, after Garve's death, Schleiermacher made a disparaging comment about him, stating that Garve was merely an annotational philosopher and not a truly original or systematic thinker. This suggests to us that something important must have happened in the intervening period. Systematicity and originality are now considered important requirements for good philosophy. Carl Leonhard Reinhold, an early Kantian, distinguishes between self-thinkers and mere after-worshippers ("Nachbetern") and

historians of philosophy. Reinhold believes that real philosophy must take the form of a system, which is reflected in the prevalence of 'System drafts' and 'Systemabrisse' in German philosophy. The aim is for philosophy to become a principle-based science.

Both claims can be associated with Kant, although he is not their inventor. The demand for systematicity, as well as the demand for originality, predates Kant and can be found in other European scientific cultures, not just in Germany.

However, Kant was particularly influential in this respect. Hardly anyone else in philosophy stands for the demand for self-thinking and scientificity to a comparable degree. Against the mere historians of philosophy, Kant repeatedly emphasizes that it is not a question of hiding behind the authorities of the past. All that matters is whether the philosophical statements can stand up in the court of reason.

Moreover, philosophy should be guided by the example of the sciences. Philosophy should become science itself. This is also directed against the eclectic and popular philosophical approaches of his contemporaries. In Kant's time, in fact, philosophy still showed itself in all kinds of forms: there were philosophical letters, meditations, notes, etc. What science demands, however, is systematic unity. And no one has said what this means as clearly as Reinhold and, after him, Fichte: namely, that every statement may only be derived from one principle. What exactly this principle is, however, was unclear and disputed. The result were numerous philosophical systems that have set out to find or supposedly found this principle, from which all sciences ultimately understand themselves and to which everything can be traced back.

Although most of the major systems of philosophy were abandoned less than 50 years after Kant, many of these ideas have survived to the present day. This is presumably due to their affinity with the understanding of philosophy as a science.

That there is a development here that goes back to a certain interpretation of Kant's philosophy as epistemology, especially by the Neo-Kantians, has long been known and need not be elaborated here. In contemporary introductions to philosophy from the analytic tradition, the call to think independently is unsurprisingly emphasized. While this is a positive aspect that aligns with the Enlightenment tradition, it is important to recognize blind spots in the self-understanding and justification of these assumptions. It is crucial to note that this philosophical construction is not natural but rather historically conditioned. Indeed, it is a construction. While it is a unique and important motor for countless philosophical innovations, I question whether it justifies the devaluation of other philosophical approaches. More importantly, I doubt that it is suitable as a universal criterion for good philosophical practice. For it is a very narrow phenomenon not only in time but also in place. This requirement was invented and practiced mainly in Europe and the associated English-speaking world. Historically, this demand is linked to many preconditions that have not been reflected upon.

To adopt a Kantian phrase for my conclusion: The division into historical and systematic philosophy does not stand on secure ground and does not arise from the nature of human reason itself.

Discussion

Audience: I am actually rather critical of historical work in general. I have two questions. The first is that you criticize the current model of philosophy by saying that it is unclear how to distinguish between historical and systematic philosophy. But I think that this vagueness and lack of clarity is a great virtue of the current model. Take someone who is always interpreting others in some way, and take someone else who wants to make progress on a particular issue. I think of it like a slider: At one end of the slider is the commentator who is constantly trying to understand what a person is saying.

And it's so hard to figure out that you never even get to the point to think about whether it's true. For example, you have to spend 99% of your time making sure you understand what Kant is trying to say. On the other hand, there is someone who is interested in philosophical questions and someone who just thinks about the facts without realizing what anyone else has said. In my opinion, both models are kind of crazy. In fact, it would be best to find yourself somewhere in the middle of something like that.

The second question is that you said the distinction itself is historical. But I do not really understand why it is historical. Could you please elaborate on that.

Andree Hahmann: As for your first question, I was indeed thinking along similar lines. In fact, I also believe that a little more vagueness would be good here. But I was wondering what this does with the somewhat clear-cut distinction between the history of philosophy and systematic philosophy, if we assume that there is indeed a large space of conceptual vagueness in philosophical activity that makes it impossible to distinguish most work in philosophy in detail. Rather, it seems as if one easily merges into the other, as if they constantly go hand in hand. But if that's what you mean, then that would be in full agreement with what I'm saying. So that's not really an objection. However, my assessment of this phenomenon differs from yours. My point is to show that, because of this vagueness, it makes no sense to stick to this strict division, which, as I said, is extremely important not only for the organization of departments but also for filling new positions. But if we could agree that not only systematic philosophers sometimes do history of philosophy, but also so-called historians of philosophy are equally systematic philosophers, then I can gladly agree with your proposal.

Audience: I would say that the longer you go back, the more difficult it becomes to recognize what these people were really saying. A few years ago, it has been put in my language, so to speak; however, 50 years ago, it's harder to understand. Go back even further, 1000 years ago, it gets extremely difficult to figure out what a philosopher really meant. So if you go back to antiquity, for example, you have to spend a lot of time learning Greek and figuring out how to translate and interpret a particular text. And at some point, the slider gets into a terrain that is actually not quite philosophical anymore, but becomes more and more philological. You then have to ask yourself whether this is still philosophy and whether it is even worth investing so much time in this activity.

Andree Hahmann: You are absolutely right about one thing, and I admit it without hesitation, it becomes more and more philological the further back in time you go. You have to have the means, the tools, so to speak, to approach these philosophers. This means, you must study an ancient language for years and so on. It's even unclear what exactly is being said in Greek and how to translate it. However, I think it is worth putting this effort into these texts. I was talking about the importance of philosophical discourse for philosophy. You said that it is much easier for you to understand what is meant when it is written in your own language. I assume you mean not only the language, but also the terminology used and the assumptions you can take for granted when dealing with these texts. But if you go back in time, you realize that at a certain point the philosophical discourse is so different from the current discourse that it does not share your assumptions any longer, that it does not even ask similar questions, and that you will find completely different starting points. At this point, you might realize that some of the assumptions you took for granted are not as necessary as you initially believed. You might even become more critical of these and other assumptions and begin to question what you blindly adopted in the beginning. You might even find that if you change these assumptions that significantly shape current discourse, these essential questions and problems might not even arise anymore. Indeed, I

believe that many good so-called systematic philosophers do exactly this. Take McDowell as an example, or others who first worked in ancient philosophy and then applied their work to current discussions. Accordingly, philosophical progress is not linear and does not mean that there is more and more differentiation with regard to a certain number of questions. On the contrary, progress in philosophy often also means that these very questions are no longer asked because we have changed our underlying assumptions. Sometimes this happens because we have seen that earlier philosophical discourses did not face these problems or could easily answer them. It should be noted that the same applies to our neglect of engaging with philosophers or philosophical traditions from other cultures, as this can also prevent us from thinking critically about the presuppositions or unasked questions of our own philosophical discourse. Focusing exclusively on current philosophical discourse, much like focusing exclusively on Western philosophy, blinds philosophers to the real presuppositions of their thinking and the very often both locally and temporally contingent assumptions that shape their thinking and what they accept as good philosophy. But that is another issue.

Audience: Could you please say something about the second question? I was kind of lost in the middle of your talk, because at first I thought that systematic philosophy applied to contemporary and more scientific forms of philosophy. But later you said that systematic philosophy began with Kant. I think it would be very helpful if you could give us some kind of definition of what systematic philosophy is as opposed to historical philosophy.

Andree Hahmann: If I had approached the whole question differently, from the side of systematic philosophy, I would have been at a very similar loss to determine what systematic philosophy is. So what does it mean to philosophize systematically? This is also something that is not really clearly understood. If you look at the history of philosophy and see where the idea of a system comes from and what system basically means, you will find that this idea goes back to antiquity and relates to the ancient understanding of science, understood as a system of knowledge. This traditional understanding of system prevailed for almost 1500 years. In the 18th century, however, thinking about systems intensified. Thinkers such as Lambert devoted much attention to clarifying what a system meant in philosophy. The ancient idea of system evolved, and now a system is not just any kind of combination of cognitions. What became essential for a system is that it follows from certain principles, or that there is an end or goal to the whole. All the other sciences, too, have been put into a system that has an end point. If you ask a systematic philosopher what systematic means to him? He will often be at a loss to determine exactly what it means, but some of the traditional ideas about systematicity are still present. He might answer that his thoughts end up building a system of cognitions called knowledge. That these cognitions are coherent, or can be combined into a whole, etc. These are all concepts and ideas that were first elaborated in the middle of the 18th century. And similarly, at the same time, the history of philosophy emerged. Until then history of philosophy as a subdiscipline of philosophy didn't really exist. What was understood by history of philosophy was more like a collection of opinions and lives of philosophers. But then famous contemporaries of Kant, such as Reinhold or Tennemann, also thought about the history of philosophy as a special or unique part of philosophy, apart from philosophy in its systematic perspective. All this happened, at least in Germany, from a perspective strongly influenced by Kant.

Audience: So your main argument is that the distinction between systematic and historical philosophy is itself a historical phenomenon? You are saying that it was Kant who brought us to the realization that philosophy must be systematic. I have some doubts about this historical claim, because even before Kant there were many philosophers in the Western tradition who described

their own works as highly systematic, highly original and highly scientific.

Andree Hahmann: I think I can easily agree with you. I only chose Kant because it is easiest to illustrate this point using Kant. But you could certainly also start with Descartes. But in principle and generally speaking, this understanding of philosophy that emphasizes both systematicity and originality is an idea that has essentially emerged in modern philosophy. And I think I would revise my original assertion and say that it became most tangible in Kant. However, it also has an important history, and it is certainly not just a German phenomenon, but also appears in the French and English traditions. They all emphasize originality as opposed to mere commentary, as found in the older scholastic tradition, which they wanted to overcome. Ultimately, then, the aim behind it all was somehow to get rid of Aristotle. So we could also describe this whole tradition that stands behind the claim to do philosophy systematically as a departure from the Aristotelian tradition of philosophy.

References

- [1] Antognazza, Maria Rosa, "The Benefit to Philosophy of the Study of Its History," in: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23.1 (2015), 161-184.
- [2] Charles, David, *The Undivided Self. Aristotle and the 'Mind-Body' Problem*, Oxford 2021.
- [3] Frede, Dorothea, "Alexander of Aphrodisias", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/alexander-aphrodisias/>>.
- [4] Sauer, Hanno, "The end of history", in: *Inquiry* 2022, 1-25 (retrieved online).
- [5] Sauer, Hanno, "The ends of history. A reply to Sauer," in: *Inquiry* 2023, 1-11 (retrieved online).