

Philosophy's past: Cognitive values and the history of philosophy

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Abstract

Recent authors hold that the role of historical scholarship within contemporary philosophical practice is to question current assumptions, to expose vestiges or to calibrate intuitions. On these views, historical scholarship is *dispensable*, since these roles can be achieved by nonhistorical methods. And the value of historical scholarship is *contingent*, since the need for the role depends on the presence of questionable assumptions, vestiges or comparable intuitions. In this paper I draw an analogy between scientific and philosophical practice, in order to float one role for historical scholarship that is nonreplicable and noncontingent. It has long been acknowledged that cognitive values – features of theories that facilitate understanding, such as ontological parsimony, ideological simplicity, computational ease and fecundity – play a key role within science. The role of some of these values within philosophy also has received attention but left understudied are the values of novelty and conservativeness. These values influence theory choice, the selection of methodology, the setting of research agenda, and the presentation of results; and are best assessed with a historically informed evaluation.

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This role for historical scholarship is not replicable by nonhistorical methods, and is not contingent on the presence of questionable assumptions, vestiges or comparable intuitions.

KEYWORDS

cognitive values, general history of philosophy, historiography, metaphilosophy, philosophical methodology

1 | INTRODUCTION

I will start with a question. Why study the history of philosophy? That, at least, is an easy question to answer: the history of philosophy is interesting; historical scholarship has intrinsic value, and historians of philosophy do not need to justify what they are doing. But let me ask a related question. What is the instrumental value of historical scholarship for contemporary philosophy? To answer this question, I will draw an analogy between scientific practice and philosophical practice. It has long been acknowledged that cognitive values such as ontological parsimony, ideological simplicity, and explanatory power play a role within science in theory choice, selecting a methodology or setting a research agenda. In this paper, I will argue that there are certain cognitive values, playing a role within philosophy, that are best assessed in a historical context. And so scholarship on the history of philosophy makes a distinctive contribution to philosophical practice.

A map of the paper may be helpful to the reader. I will begin with a survey of the discussion on the role of historical scholarship in contemporary scientific and philosophical practice (Section 2). This discussion has tended towards the view that this role is to question current assumptions, expose vestiges or calibrate intuitions. On this view, historical scholarship is *dispensable*, since these roles can be achieved by nonhistorical methods. And the value of historical scholarship is *contingent*, since the need for the role depends on the presence of questionable assumptions, vestiges or comparable intuitions. This yields several desiderata for an account of the instrumental value of the history of philosophy. I will argue for a role for historical scholarship which, if not indispensable, at least cannot be achieved by other methods and which is not dependent on these contingencies. To begin this argument, I then will discuss the role of values in scientific and philosophical practice (Section 3). Parameters along which may be assessed theories, positions, methodologies and research agendas include: epistemic values – features that make a theory more likely to be true, such as internal and external consistency, empirical adequacy and predictive competence; cognitive values – features that facilitate understanding, such as ideological simplicity and fecundity; and societal values, tracking the potential benefits and harms arising from a research agenda. I next will turn to the understudied values of novelty and conservativeness (Section 4). These features carry cognitive value, and can influence how contemporary philosophers set a research agenda, choose a problem set, select a methodology and present results. They may also carry epistemic and societal value. I will argue that an adequate assessment of novelty and conservativeness requires a historically informed evaluation. This role for historical scholarship meets the above desiderata. The role is modest but is not replicable by nonhistorical methods, and is not contingent on the presence of questionable assumptions, vestiges or comparable intuitions.

To illustrate this role for the history of philosophy, I briefly will discuss a case study (Section 5). And I will end by responding to a few objections (Section 6).

2 | A SELECTIVE SURVEY OF THE RECENT DISCUSSION

In this section, I will survey some of the recent discussion on the role of historical scholarship in contemporary scientific and philosophical practice. I do not intend to give an exhaustive survey of this literature. Such a survey would not be needed for my present purposes, which is not to show that everyone else is wrong – indeed, I agree with many of the following views. But a selective and admittedly opinionated survey of a few positions will bring out some common tendencies in this literature. And the survey will bring out several desiderata for any new proposal to meet.

Before looking at a few authors whose views are more promising, let me lay aside a few possible positions: inspired by Glock (2008), although not following his classification precisely, we might label these positions ahistoricism, extreme historicism and moderate historicism. According to *ahistoricists*, the history of philosophy is a field of study distinct from philosophy and the study of philosophy's history provides no advantage to the contemporary practice of philosophy. According to *extreme historicists*, philosophy is to be identified with its history – or a little more carefully, the correct contemporary philosophical methodology is to be identified with a certain kind of historical scholarship. And according to *moderate historicists*, philosophy and its history are distinct yet the study of the history of philosophy is a necessary component of philosophy. This is a coarse grained classification, and others make finer grained distinctions. The above mentioned Glock, for example, distinguishes extreme historicism, the view that philosophy ought to be historical in both method and conclusions, from mainline historicism, which by contrast, holds that philosophy ought to be historical in method but ought to draw nonhistorical conclusions. But a coarse grained classification serves our present purposes.

I will explain soon why we can lay these positions aside. But it may prove to be useful downstream to linger for a moment on extreme historicism. Let me take for illustration just a few examples from a single volume. These authors tend to view contemporary philosophical positions, debates and methods as essentially negatively characterized by reference to their historical predecessors. For example, Taylor (1984, pp. 17ff.) holds that it is essential to understanding philosophical problems that one understands them genetically, since the reasons for our practices have become partly repressed over time. To make these reasons more perspicuous requires that we recover lost previous articulations. This historical retrieval can liberate us from past but lingering mistakes, or restore fruitful views away from which we have drifted.

To give another example, Rorty (1984) views philosophy as a *Geistesgeschichte*: unlike doxography, philosophy is not a mere record of what the historical views were; unlike rational reconstruction, philosophy should be concerned with historically accurate representation; yet unlike historical reconstruction, philosophy should go beyond an uncritical study expressed in the vocabulary of the historical figures themselves. The *Geistesgeschichte* is the formulation of a canon, and justifies our belief that we have made progress on the problem sets deserving of the honorific 'philosophy'. Somewhat similarly, Krüger (1984) holds that philosophy is essentially of a historical nature, since it is constitutive of a successor theory that it can interpret its predecessors and evaluate the limits of their applicability. Krüger (1984, pp. 93ff.) also suggests an argument that, were contemporary philosophical positions not understood by reference to historical views, we would lack warrant in our belief that there is philosophical progress. If a contemporary view is not a corrective to an earlier position, or a contemporary debate centered around a problem set

that supplants and improves upon an earlier debate, we could not say there is progress, but only that there is merely a succession of one view replacing another, or one debate fizzling out and another, unrelated debate starting up in its stead.

These arguments support a claim weaker than extreme historicism. As Glock (2008) notes, the history leading up to a contemporary position might be useful when a certain condition is met – namely, when the contemporary position is fruitfully characterized negatively with respect to the historical position. This condition surely sometimes obtains. But there is no reason to think that this condition always obtains or that the condition necessarily obtains. Moreover, even when a contemporary view is helpfully characterized in contradistinction to a predecessor, these authors give us little reason to believe that such a characterization exhaustively defines the contemporary view or uniquely picks it out from other alternatives. Placing a contemporary view within its historical context may be helpful, without contemporary philosophical method and historical study thereby being identical. Similar comments can be made in response to the considerations Krüger puts forward in support of viewing the history of philosophy as providing warrant for our conviction that we are making progress. This at best shows that recognition of a certain kind of progress can be justified partly through historical scholarship; it does not show that this recognition is an essential feature of philosophical practice. For all these reasons, the characterizations of philosophy put forward by these authors fail to support extreme historicism.

Well, that was rather quick and dirty. I do not expect anyone to be persuaded against extreme historicism by these brief remarks. But we need not go further for our purposes. Recall that I said I would set aside three positions: ahistoricism, extreme historicism and moderate historicism. My reason for ignoring ahistoricism and extreme historicism is that on neither position does the question what contribution is made by historical scholarship really arise: philosophy and its past are either wholly unrelated or they are one and the same. On neither view would historical scholarship have merely instrumental value for contemporary philosophy. And I do not aim to defend moderate historicism: I wish to show that historical scholarship is beneficial to, not a requirement for, philosophical practice.

I will begin with the literature on the role of historical scholarship in contemporary scientific practice, and then turn to the analogous question for philosophy. The discussion on the relation between scientific practice and its history has been dominated over the last sixty years by claims made by Kuhn, Feyerabend and others on the incommensurability of theories separated by scientific revolutions or paradigm shifts. Such views were put forward in opposition to the view of scientific development as a continual approximation of truth, with taxonomies, methodologies and goals that remain invariant over time. Instead, theories separated by a scientific revolution might have distinct taxonomic classifications of the same entities, entirely different methods or even different goals. For example, Kuhn (2012, p. 148) argues that, according to the Ptolemaic taxonomy, part of what is meant by ‘earth’ is a fixed position, so Copernicus’ claim that the earth moved was, by Ptolemaic lights, incoherent.

Notice, however, that incommensurability does not entail incomparability. Feyerabend (1962, 66) notes that some empirical observations can be seen as refuting a current theory only after an incommensurate alternative has been proffered with which to read the observations. In some cases, incommensurable alternatives can better assess a theory than commensurable alternatives. To continue the Copernicean revolution example, Kuhn (2012, p. 68) notes that the discrepancies between predictions made with Ptolemy’s system and the available empirical observations were best resolved by rejecting altogether the Ptolemaic taxonomy, on which the earth is by definition immovable.

Much of this discussion concerns forward progress in moving from an antecedent theory to an incommensurable subsequent theory. What about reflection backwards? On the view that some theories are incommensurable, special care must be taken to bring historical information to the assessment of contemporary theories. Antecedent views might have radically different assumptions, taxonomies, methodologies and scientific goals. But careful reflection on historical positions might nonetheless aid assessment. Just as subsequent theories can shed light on the shortcomings of their precedents, so too historical consideration of antecedent theories can throw into sharp relief the assumptions, taxonomies, methodologies and goals characteristic of subsequent theories.

Although the contrasts are likely to be striking when comparing incommensurate theories, similar assessment strategies can be employed with comparing commensurate theories not divided by scientific revolutions or paradigm shifts. For example, Maienschein, Laubichler and Loettgers (2008) draw on episodes in biological research to illustrate how the history of science can clarify assumptions in contemporary models and theories. They (2008, p. 347) write:

[i]n general, critical historical evaluations are needed because the crucial assumptions and conceptual constraints, the details of the central experimental systems or original formal models, as well as the supporting data and measurements, are generally not included in current or semiaxiomatic formulations of most (biological) theories. It is, therefore, not surprising that many models and theories in biology are currently used mostly pragmatically: scientists tend to know which ones “work” and tend to modify or adapt them to different data rather than reevaluating their fundamental assumptions. However, in cases in which substantial revisions are required, researchers generally go back to the original literature in order to uncover precisely those assumptions that have constrained the model or theory in the past. In this sense, history is an essential part of the avant-garde of biology.

On this view, the history of science can be useful when there are vestigial assumptions, tacitly operative in contemporary theoretic frameworks, which are inhibiting forward progress.

Now, what of the instrumental value of historical scholarship to contemporary philosophical practice? Philosophy's history is a repository of ideas, positions, debates and methods. So looking to philosophy's past might enrich a contemporary discussion. But does approaching this repository as a history, and not a synchronic list of views, offer advantages? Not unlike Maienschein, Laubichler and Loettgers's (2008) view of the history of science, some authors view historical work as exposing vestiges whose influence on contemporary philosophy might otherwise go unnoticed. For example, Glock (2008) perhaps views the exposure of vestiges as a role for the history of philosophy that could not be provided by a repository of synchronic positions.

Wilson (1992) illustrates a similar view by arguing that the contemporary discussion of perception can incorporate unawares inappropriate vestiges from a wholly different historical discussion of perception. Philosophers in the early modern period explain the relation between sense experience and physical reality as a rival to scholasticism, with science and philosophy seamlessly combined. Wilson worries that appropriating aspects of the modern discussion can bring into the contemporary discussion assumptions about the relation between science and philosophy with which we no longer agree. Historical scholarship can correct this misappropriation. Following Wilson as an explicit influence, Domski (2013) worries that appropriativists distort. Embracing the contextualist claim that philosophical practice is contextually defined, and the standards for doing philosophy are supplied by the historical situation, she argues that one role for the

historian is to identify how past philosophy is different. One goal for historical scholarship, then, is to gain an enhanced perspective on the questions and concerns that define contemporary philosophy. Domski's (2013, p. 284) aim is that "[b]y looking at Descartes's and Newton's competing arguments for why it is appropriate to mathematize nature in order to understand nature, [she hopes] to show that structural realists could benefit from addressing the extent to which the epistemic and the ontological determine the development of our physical theories." Reflecting on her methodology of 'contextualism', approaching historical figures on their own terms, Domski (2013, pp. 299–300) writes that she is "not claiming that Descartes and Newton provide us the right (or only) answers to questions about what our mathematically formulated physical theories represent about nature. Nor is [her] point that attention to these historical actors can somehow correct our current practice. [Her] point is that a contextualist reading of Descartes and Newton can reorient our current discussions and enhance the terms of the current debate between epistemic and ontic structural realists."

Others view historical work as useful for overcoming contemporary prejudices, not by exposing historical vestiges but by bringing in historical rivals to challenge contemporary views. For example, Della Rocca (2013) criticises the contemporary use of intuitions in philosophical arguments. How can we break away from this methodology? Della Rocca suggests: look to philosophers working before the 'veil of intuitions'. Della Rocca holds that historical figures typically do not aim to accommodate intuitions: as an example, he notes that Spinoza follows the Principle of Sufficient Reason to counterintuitive consequences. Historical scholarship can in this way offer alternative theories or illustrate alternative methodologies. A similar approach is taken by Schliesser (2013) and Nelson (2013) in the same volume. And Glock might endorse a somewhat similar line, taking the philosopher to critically engage with historical views with which they disagree, with the potential for correction of contemporary beliefs. He (2008, p. 892) writes: "The interpreter is open to the text precisely because she treats it as a philosophical challenge. She allows the text to question both her own understanding of it and her prejudgements about the matter at issue. The dialogue may either necessitate a revision of her interpretation, or of her prejudgements, or it may confirm the original attribution of error."

Again, let me emphasize that I do not intend to provide an exhaustive survey of the literature; my goal is to bring out a few common themes, and so to lay out a few desiderata for a positive proposal. But it might be worth taking a moment to note that the view that the history of philosophy challenges contemporary views, assumptions, frameworks, or question sets, has been not uncommon within the relatively recent discussion. Some view the history of philosophy as a repository of positions and arguments. For example, Garber (1988, p. 28) characterizes Bennett (1984) as viewing the history of philosophy as "a kind of storehouse of positions and arguments, positions and arguments that we can use as guides or inspirations the positions we should take, or illustrations of dead ends that we should avoid." Gracia (1988, p. 108) views the history of philosophy as unnecessary for philosophy (since he takes philosophy to make claims without reference to time) but useful "for it furnishes diverse formulations of positions and arguments that facilitate the philosopher's task. In many instances it may supply the solution or the seeds of the solution that the philosopher was looking for, or it may show that certain views are oversimplistic, or that certain arguments are unsound." Sorell (2005, p. 6) holds that "older approaches can throw light on current versions of old problems, or produce instructive examples of failed solutions." The view that the history of philosophy is a repository of positions is also held by some detractors; for example, it may be behind Sauer's (2022) contention that historical scholarship lacks instrumental value (since historical views are mostly false).

Others stress the exposure of contemporary assumptions. Speaking, like Wilson, of the modern view of the distinction between philosophy and science, Garber (1988, p. 41) writes: “we should be careful about attributing our distinction between philosophy and science to earlier thinkers. There is a philosophical lesson to be learned as well... Why is it that we tend to see such a radical break between philosophy and science, and, more importantly, should we? The question can be raised directly, without the need for history, as Quine has done. But history brings the point home in an especially clear way: it shows us an assumption we take for granted by pointing out that it is not an assumption everyone makes.” Hatfield (2005, p. 93) sees the history as allowing us to “gain new perspective on current assumptions, or to question general platitudes.” Garber (2005, p. 145) takes history to “show the philosopher alternative ways of conceiving what philosophy is ... [and so] can help free ourselves from the tyranny of the present.” Cottingham (2005, p. 31) views history as “making the familiar seem strange, and vice versa. The sense of strangeness may create a kind of hiatus, making us pause and stand back from the immediate mêlée of contemporary philosophical disputes, leading us to re-evaluate the presuppositions we (often unconsciously) bring to bear on those disputes.” Similar views are expressed by Williams (1994) and Garber (1989).

Before moving on, let me briefly discuss an interesting recent outlier. McDaniel (2014) takes a distinctive approach, and one which does not require that there be vestiges or unattractive contemporary views for historical scholarship to be useful to contemporary philosophical practice. McDaniel views the history of philosophy as calibrating intuitions and confronting groupthink by exposure to philosophical traditions unlike our own. We calibrate our intuitions by coordinating our intuitions with the intuitions of others. McDaniel notes that coordination with historical figures is especially useful since, because their philosophical setting is unlike our own, we enrich our philosophical community by widening it.

These are not the only approaches. But they indicate some of the tendencies, and some of the range of views, in the recent literature. Let me make a few comments as takeaways from this brief and partial survey. First, our discussion might mislead the reader. Remember, I do not claim that the history of philosophy has value only if it makes a contribution to contemporary philosophy. In my opinion, the history of philosophy is intrinsically interesting, and scholarship on this history would be worthwhile even if it made no contribution to contemporary philosophy whatsoever. But our concern here is with the instrumental value of historical scholarship. It is not easy to say with precision how the history of philosophy is relevant to contemporary philosophy and, as I will explain momentarily, the views just canvassed leave something to be desired. But I do not deny that exposing vestiges, challenging contemporary assumptions or calibrating intuitions is worthwhile. Identifying vestigial views, or contrasting contemporary assumptions with their historical antecedents, viewed as such, or calibrating intuitions against those of historical figures – that is to say, approaching these tasks by appeal to history – may, as Glock, Wilson, Domski, McDaniel and others suggest, make achieving these goals easier. And so the history of philosophy may contribute to contemporary philosophy in these ways.

But these envisioned roles for historical scholarship are attenuated, in at least two ways. The roles are *dispensable*, since they can be replaced by nonhistorical considerations. And the roles are often available to be filled only *contingently* – only if there are indeed vestiges, contemporary assumptions which can be helpfully contrasted with their historical antecedents, or comparable intuition. This is true of many of the roles canvassed for historical scholarship within scientific practice. Consider again the view that certain scientific theories are incommensurable. On this view, as we mentioned, historical consideration of incommensurable antecedent theories can throw into sharp relief the assumptions, taxonomies, methodologies and goals characteristic of subsequent theories, but these features can be assessed without appeal to historical antecedents.

And the employment of these historical considerations are dependent on the theories being on either side of a scientific revolution. Or consider Maienschein, Laubichler and Loettgers (2008), who hold that historical positions can be used to bring into question fundamental theoretical or methodological assumptions. Notice that on this construal, too, the usefulness of the history of science to contemporary scientific practice is contingent on the need for revision. Furthermore, this is a role that may be played by nonhistorical methods: historical research may be useful for uncovering fundamental assumptions of methods and theories, but careful analysis can achieve the same ends.

Turning to the discussion of philosophical practice, recall that Glock holds that a history offers advantages over a synchronic list of positions, debates and methods, since some historical positions are vestiges, still playing an implicit role in contemporary philosophy. Glock (2008, p. 882) concedes that, although it may be easier to bring them into view through historical scholarship, it is possible to retrieve these implicit features nonhistorically. Moreover, on this view, the utility of the history of philosophy is contingent on the presence of vestigial traces of that history. If there happens to be no such remnants, then the history of philosophy offers nothing that could not be provided by a repository of synchronic positions. Indeed, the space of possible philosophical positions at any time far outstrips the collection of philosophical positions which were at some time or other actually endorsed, so limiting oneself to historical views, when assessing contemporary ones, would be disadvantageous, even if there are vestiges. Recall that Wilson holds that there are anachronistic views concerning the relation between science and philosophy hidden in contemporary discussions of perception. Historical scholarship would be needed to identify these views as vestigial traces of earlier discussions of perception. But exposing these views as inappropriate in the contemporary discussion would not require any historical input.

Domski, recall, holds the view that history can reorient and enhance our current discussions. But Domski recognizes the attenuated role of the history of philosophy on her view. Of this role, Domski (2013, pp. 299–300) writes:

Must we turn to history to gain this deeper perspective on our current practices? Here I grant that the answer is no. But the main question at hand is whether we can turn to history for such a perspective, and in this regard, I hope I have said enough to address the worries of revisionism and distortion and to show that, with the proper mediation, contextualist history can illuminate our current philosophical circumstances and possibly even motivate us to reorient our philosophical priorities.

Moreover, if the role is there to be filled, it is still contingent whether a historical approach is advantageous, since this depends on the presence of whatever factors make exposure of vestiges or contemporary assumptions through historical approach easier than exposure through nonhistorical approaches.

Finally, consider McDaniel's proposal that the history of philosophy helps to calibrate contemporary intuitions. The calibration of our intuitions benefits from the expansion of the data set of intuitions. But as McDaniel notes, this expansion is a goal that can be achieved through a variety of nonhistorical methods – for example, by enlarging the demographic representation of those practicing philosophy, through the study of other contemporary philosophical traditions, and by the polling of those not familiar with academic philosophy through the methods of experimental philosophy. The calibration of intuitions is arguably an important role within philosophical practice, and one that can be played by historical scholarship, but it is a role that is replicable by other methods. A merit of McDaniel's view is that the instrumental value of historical

scholarship is not dependent on the presence of vestiges or unattractive contemporary assumptions. The calibration of any given set of intuitions is beneficial regardless whether there is local agreement or disagreement between contemporary philosophers and historical figures. However, calibration arguably requires historical cases sufficiently similar to contemporary cases to elicit comparable intuitions. The particular views might be dissimilar, but calibration requires that the problem sets and methodologies be commensurable. The value of historical scholarship for the calibration of contemporary intuitions is contingent on the presence of comparable intuitions.

Our survey of views has yielded several desiderata. I will argue for a modest role for historical scholarship, but one that cannot be played by nonhistorical considerations, and one that is not dependent on contingencies such as the presence of vestiges, unattractive contemporary assumptions or comparable intuitions.

3 | VALUES IN SCIENTIFIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

To begin this argument, I will discuss the role of values in scientific practice. The discussion of values in this context arose in response to the observation that evidence underdetermines theory choice. To adjudicate among rival scientific theories with equivalent conformity to empirical evidence and predictive power, philosophers of science have appealed to a wide variety of values. For example, Kuhn (2012) cites accuracy, simplicity, internal and external consistency, breadth of scope, and fruitfulness. Quine and Ullian (1978) list conservatism, modesty, simplicity, generality, and refutability. Longino (1990) cites among traditional virtues empirical adequacy or accuracy, simplicity, and explanatory power or breadth of scope. Douglas (2009, 89) lists predictive accuracy, explanatory power, scope, and simplicity or economy. However, a host of alternatives to these traditional values also have been proposed. Laudan (1984) includes prediction of surprising results, and variety of evidence among virtues. Longino (1996) cites novelty and ontological heterogeneity. And Douglas (2009) includes concern for human life, reduction of suffering, and promotion of political freedoms.

Values allow evaluation and preferential ranking among theories, positions, hypotheses, methodologies, frameworks, problem sets, and research agendas. Evaluations and rankings can be in terms of different goals and so values are of different kinds. Some evaluations are in terms of epistemic goals. Features such as internal consistency, empirical adequacy and predictive competence might assess the likelihood of truth for theories, positions and hypotheses, and they might also assess the likelihood of producing results for methodologies, frameworks, and problem sets. Let me flag that not all theorists view such traits as values. Douglas (2009) views these features as instead baseline requirements. Unlike values, which are features for which to strive but need not be fully present in all cases, these traits are necessities. And unlike values, which allow us to rank acceptable theories, these traits operate negatively to exclude a theory that does not instantiate them. Internal consistency is such a feature, since a self-contradictory theory is a non-starter, a failed theory that wears its falsity on its sleeve. Empirical adequacy is such a feature, since a theory that does conform to the world in its broad strokes falls short of minimal requirements. And predictive competence is such a feature: as Douglas notes, predictive competence is not the same thing as predictive precision or accuracy, since a theory can be competent with neither precision or great accuracy; but a theory that is not close enough to get by is not a contender. In the next section, I will suggest that there are truth conducive features that are not just minimal requirements.

Other values aid cognition. These evaluations are in terms of ease of understanding the positions, assessing the arguments for the positions or otherwise following the reasoning, agreeing with the intuitions or other data supporting the theory, appreciating the significance of the issue for other areas of research, and so on. For example, all else being equal, an ideologically simpler theory facilitates understanding. It is easier to grasp a theory with fewer primitive concepts than one with more, easier to follow the reasoning from those primitives to derived theorems, easier to apply the concepts so to classify the data, easier thereby to assess the classified data to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses, and so easier to appreciate the results of the theory. Similar comments could be made for ontological parsimony. Other cognitive values facilitate our appreciation of a theory, the significance of its results, and its relation to other areas of research. For example, Kuhn (2012) and Longino (1996) discuss explanatory power or breadth of scope. A theory that exhibits explanatory power can explain a wide range of phenomena. A theory that exhibits breadth of scope yields consequences that extend beyond those the theory was originally developed to explain. I will discuss several other cognitive values below.

Finally, some values are social, political or ethical. These evaluations are in terms of societal benefits and harms, or advantages and disadvantages to individuals. Scientific theory choice is sensitive to considerations such as applicability to current human needs, concern with the effects of adopting a theory, and the risks and potential for harm. Typically, these values are related to public standards, to regulative ideals shaping the normative discourse in a scientific community, and to criteria guiding the formulation, acceptance, and praise or disparagement of theories.

It will prove helpful later to discuss these various kinds of values – epistemic, cognitive and societal – in just a bit more detail. These classes of traits are not disjoint. For example, ontological parsimony may be both an epistemic and a cognitive value. If Ockham's Razor is true, then a theory with fewer kinds of entities is more likely to be true than a theory with more kinds of entities. But an ontologically parsimonious theory also might facilitate cognition. On the other hand, ontological homogeneity may be in certain contexts a societal or political vice. Longino (1996) argues that ontologically homogeneous theories place pressure on theorists to reduce differences by privileging one class of entity and viewing the rest as dependent, deviant, incomplete, or failed. Where ontologically homogeneous theories reduce individual differences to as few categories as possible, ontologically heterogeneous theories tend towards treating individual differences as important and not to be elided in abstractions. Longino holds that, where ontologically homogeneous scientific theories tend to support political hierarchies, and perpetuate gender oppression by reducing gender visibility, the promotion of ontologically heterogeneous theories is connected to the rejection of theories of inferiority.

To what extent do values typically viewed as nonepistemic influence theory choice? It is relatively uncontroversial that scientific inquiry is value-laden and that cognitive and societal values influence aspects of discovery such as research agenda, the allocation of financial support and other resources, and the presentation and application of results. But it is controversial that cognitive and societal values influence scientific method, theory choice and the justification of results. Some authors hold that this influence is minimal. For example, Douglas (2009) holds that there is a legitimate direct role for social and ethical values in the initial stages of a scientific project, contributing to the decision which projects to undertake, and what methodological approach to adopt. This role is direct, since the values provide reasons to pursue one project or one method over another. Once the study is underway, however, any direct role of values, in Douglas' view, must be highly constrained. Our desire to promote ethical or political goals should not influence what we take to be true. Rather, values can continue to play only an indirect role in directing scientific practice. Douglas views the indirect role for social and ethical values to lie in assessing the

consequences of error. For example, the evidential support required to confirm a hypothesis in medical research should be higher when being wrong could harm individuals.

What of features typically taken to be cognitive values? Douglas holds that these do not provide reasons to accept a theory. Explanatory power does not entail reliability: for example, just-so stories can provide explanations despite being false. And similar comments can be made for many other cognitive values: a simple theory might be wishful thinking in a complex world; diverse phenomena might fall under the confines of one theory and so breadth may not track truth; a fruitful theory may prove false over time, even if it spurs on research; and even precise theories may not be accurate. However, if my earlier observation that it is possible for a feature to be both a cognitive value and an epistemic value is correct, these features discussed by Douglas still might provide epistemic reasons for choosing one theory over another. Such reasons are not necessarily conclusive, and must be weighed against other considerations. Douglas is right to point out that explanatory power, simplicity, breadth of scope and precision need not track truth. But the same might be said for certain canonical epistemic virtues. To give just an example or two, internally consistent theories need not be true. And a theory might competently predict results without accurately describing the events that led up to those results.

Some features commonly taken to be cognitive values may well be conducive to truth, although under a *ceteris paribus* condition. Ockham's Razor is not well thought of as the principle that the more ontologically parsimonious theory is more likely to be true, regardless of other considerations. Rather, the Razor is the principle that a theory being more parsimonious is a reason for believing the theory – a reason that must be weighed against other considerations, some of which might pull in the other direction. And if Ockham's Razor is correct, and a theory committed to fewer kinds of entities is indeed, all else being equal, more likely to be true, then analogous reasoning might apply to many other cognitive values. A theory being ideologically simple is a reason for believing it true. A theory with explanatory power need not be reliable but, all else being equal, it is reasonable to believe that the theory with greater explanatory power is more likely to be true. And so on. I will not say more to defend these observations here; we will touch on it again in what follows; but the main points I want to make about the instrumental value of the history of philosophy will not depend on it.

Let us now draw an analogy between the roles of various values governing theory choice in the sciences, and the role of similar values in philosophical practice. There are some obvious disanalogies. Philosophy does not make use of empirical data in the same way that the sciences do. However, philosophical theories are sensitive to evaluation along epistemic, cognitive and social parameters. Research agenda, methodology selection and theory choice are all influenced by values in philosophical practice no less than in science. One might prefer one theory over another on the grounds that the former theory is more ontologically parsimonious, and this choice might be partly due to the conviction that the one theory being more parsimonious gives a reason to believe that this theory is, all else being equal, more likely to be true. Or one might endorse the ideologically simpler theory on the grounds that such an approach will aid cognition. Or one might choose to undertake a certain research project in the hope that the results will have salutary societal benefits. In the next section, I will discuss the role of certain understudied values within philosophical inquiry.

4 | NOVELTY AND CONSERVATIVENESS

I turn to the values of novelty and conservativeness. These values are paradigmatically used in assessments of proposed theories relative to current alternatives: conservative proposals are

consistent with presently accepted theories; novel proposals, inconsistent. But these evaluations can reflect conformity with, or difference from, contemporary views in a variety of ways. Novel theories, for example, can deviate from present theories by postulating different entities and processes, adopting different principles of explanation, incorporating alternative metaphors, or by attempting explain phenomena not previously the subject of investigation.

Within the philosophy of science literature, novelty is suggested by Harding's (1986) call for successor science and is encouraged by Longino (1996) and others. But values such as novelty and conservativeness are also not wholly incidental to philosophical progress. It might be easy to miss this. The novelty or conservativeness of a position would seem to lend that position little direct support. We care whether a view is true or false, not whether our predecessors held it. True, gestures towards a tradition are sometimes made. Consider for example the not uncommon trope, usually found when a view is first introduced in a paper, of name dropping a predecessor from the canon with a vaguely similar view. The move, however, is typically a superficial matter of presentation, softening up the readers for what is coming by reminding them of a half-forgotten view likely encountered by the author and their readers during their respective but not dissimilar educations. Citing a precedent neither is intended by the author, nor is taken by the reader, as supporting the truth of the view.

But values such as novelty and conservativeness also can lend support for a position. Much of this support is cognitive. A view that is conservative gains cognitive accessibility from familiarity, at least to those working in the tradition. It may well prove easier to appreciate tweaks on established views than to appreciate unusual new proposals. A theory that is novel, on the other hand, might be less immediately accessible but may prove fecund, and yield the benefit of new insights. Moreover, values such as novelty and conservativeness contribute to philosophical progress in other ways. These values attach not only to positions but also to frameworks, sets of problems, sets of assumptions, the bases on which we weigh some considerations over others, the methodological proclivities of practitioners, the divisions by which we carve up a field into areas of specialization, and the *déformation professionnelle* that influences our views on the place of philosophy within society. Locating these features within a historical context, and evaluating their novelty or conservativeness, moves philosophical inquiry forward. Indeed, it is here that these values perhaps play their most prominent role. For example, the influence of a traditional set of questions, orthodox way of framing these questions, or received way of going about answering the questions, can last long after the initial contenders for answers have fallen by the wayside.

There is no straightforward application of these features in assessments. Novelty and conservativeness are not all-or-nothing affairs. A theory may be orthodox in some respects, and radical in others. For example, to return to Kuhn's (2012) discussion, Copernicus rejected the Ptolemaic identification of the earth with a fixed point, while retaining other aspects of Ptolemy's theory, such as the assumption that the other planets travel at an uniform speed. And so the decision whether a theory is, all things considered, novel or conservative may not be a simple calculation. Moreover, these values pull in different directions. For example, conservativeness and novelty are in tension. Should we prefer the more conservative theory or the more novel? There is no one-size-fits-all answer. Generally perhaps, an optimal theory might exhibit a balance among these values. But where the equipoise lies will vary by case, and overall assessment requires careful judgement.

I have noted that the features of novelty and conservativeness are, in part, cognitive values. And much of the trade-off in assessment involves comparison of the respective costs and benefits novelty and conservativeness bring to the promise of a problem set, the accessibility of a methodology, the manner of presentation of theoretic results, and so on. But novelty and conservativeness also can carry societal or ethical value. For example, Longino (1996) notes that novelty

can be a societal virtue, and conservativeness a societal vice, in a context where the orthodox scientific theories support oppressive political hierarchies. On the other hand, in contexts where research traditions have had salutary ethical or political benefits, conservativeness might be a societal virtue and novelty a societal vice. As Douglas (2009) argues, when medical researchers choose a research agenda, the process requires careful calculation of the likelihood of harms being incurred through error; in such situations, deviation from established patterns of research should be undertaken with caution. Although philosophical research seldom has similarly direct risks to public health, in adjudicating on the relative merits of novelty and conservativeness, we of course should not ignore the broader context within which we practice philosophical inquiry.

Might values such as novelty and conservativeness have more robust influence on philosophical practice? As we saw earlier, it is uncontroversial that scientific inquiry is value-laden and that such values influence discovery, presentation and application, but controversial that values influence scientific method, theory choice and the justification of results. We discussed in the previous section authors such as Douglas, who resist allowing cognitive and societal values from influencing theory choice. Other authors, by contrast, make these more strident claims for the role of such values within inquiry. Authors such as Longino hold that features that carry societal value can also influence what we take to be true. And some support, lent to philosophical positions from values such as novelty and conservativeness, may be epistemic or truth conducive. For example, a conservative position arguably is more likely to be true, since it carries the weight of a prolonged period of assessment, at least for those elements which are shared with its historical precedents. The likelihood of a conservative view being true for these reasons is perhaps not dissimilar to the likelihood of a parsimonious theory being true. And as with our discussion above of parsimony, conservativeness would be truth conducive only as a *ceteris paribus* value: a theory being conservative provides at best a defeasible reason for believing it likely to be true. These are perhaps reasons to view conservativeness as an epistemic virtue and novelty as an epistemic vice. In other contexts, however, the epistemic values may be reversed. For example, if a methodology long has been fruitless, just about any new approach may be more promising, and in such situations conservativeness may be an epistemic vice and novelty an epistemic virtue.

There are still other ways in which novelty and conservativeness may influence explanatory projects. Anderson (1995) argues that certain values can influence what we take to be significant. Theoretic inquiry aims at an organized body of truths. But not every set of truths about a phenomenon constitute an acceptable theory of that phenomenon. Some sets offer a biased representation of the whole, despite containing no falsehoods, through choices over what to emphasize and what to de-emphasize. Other sets are cluttered with trivial or irrelevant truths. Anderson argues that what constitutes an unbiased representation of the whole is relative to our values, interests and aims. Such considerations influence what truths are germane to our explanatory goals, what truths are not, and so what subset of truths will suffice for satisfying these goals. The values of novelty and conservativeness may also influence standards of significance and completeness. Conservative approaches may tend to accept established choices of significant truths; novel approaches may tend to adopt new subsets of truths as playing a prominent role within our explanatory projects.

To sum up, novelty and completeness may carry epistemic value. In one context, the more conservative theory, all else being equal, may be more likely to be true, or the more conservative methodology more likely to be effective. In another context, novelty instead may be truth conducive. Novelty and conservativeness also might influence what subset of the truths we take to be significant and, taken together, sufficient to meet our explanatory goals. And novelty and conservativeness also might carry societal or ethical value in our assessments of the benefits and harms

a research agenda might incur. Going forward, however, I will not rely on novelty or conservativeness being conducive to truth, as influencing significance and completeness, or as having societal value. Even if we view novelty and conservativeness as merely cognitive values, the assessment of such values gives historical scholarship a role within philosophical practice that meets our desiderata from Section 2.

Now on to the assessment of novelty and conservativeness, and the role of historical scholarship within this assessment. Notice that conservativeness and novelty are relative to a contrast class. Longino (1996) takes the appropriate contrast set to comprise current theories. But the contrast classes also must include historical theories, in order that assessments of conservativeness and novelty meet minimal standards of adequacy. Consider an assessment of novelty that looked to a contrast class of merely concurrent theories. If the proposed theory were relevantly different from these contemporary theories, but identical to a traditional theory that was, until recently, widely held, few would conclude that the proposed theory is novel.

So the assessment of novelty and conservativeness must include historical positions. But not all historical positions are equally relevant to assessing conservativeness and novelty. We would not view a theory as conservative on the basis of its similarity to an esoteric position, advocated in the remote past, and lacking subsequent influence. What is needed is not a mere list of historical positions, but something that includes a diachronic chronology. This is not to say that there is an easy correlation between time and relevance. A more distal theory might be less relevant for assessing conservativeness and novelty. But on the other hand, a more distal position might exhibit greater influence on delineating the orthodoxy than a more proximate position. For these reasons, a mere chronology is insufficient.

The history should play a role *as* history: we need not a mere list of positions, nor even a chronology, but a historical narrative, tracing the context in which debates played out, positions were put forward, objections raised, and retorts retorted. Historical scholarship aims to provide a story of development, identifying the influences that help to produce a position, the stated commitments of a view, the reasons given in its support and the criticism a view received. We need, moreover, not a mere doxographical description of what was said, but an assessment of the explicit reasons given for or against a position. We ought to track the implicit reasons for and tacit commitments of a view. We ought to debate the correctness or incorrectness of a position and of its historical criticism.

It may be useful to compare the narrative of the history of philosophy with the causal history leading to any event. When stating the causal history of an event, we choose certain causal factors as salient to explaining why the event occurred, in the context of the act of explanation. We relegate other causal factors to background conditions. Typically, as Mackie (1974, pp. 34–7), Hart and Honoré (1985, pp. 32–44) and others note, these selection effects reflect what is taken, in the context of stating the causal history, to be ordinary and what is taken to be extraordinary. In ordinary contexts, the presence of oxygen is not cited as a cause of a house fire; but there are other contexts where the presence of oxygen is noteworthy and so is viewed as a cause within the causal history leading up to a fire – in a setting where a closed system is intended to be a vacuum, say.

As White (1965) observed, perhaps it is unavoidable that historical scholarship is also selective, and perhaps it is even desirable that it be so. The ideal of interest free history may be misguided. Selection effects might contribute to the intrinsic value of historical research. An exhaustive study of the history of philosophy is not feasible, and some selection is unavoidable. Historians need to take care to avoid the imposition of anachronism. But the research agenda for historical scholarship also can be influenced by contemporary interests, and this influence need not be pernicious. For example, what is extraordinary in a position and what is ordinary might be easier to

distinguish in hindsight. Selection effects in articulating a historical narrative also contribute to the instrumental value of historical scholarship. Contemporary interests can guide research agenda within historical scholarship. The resulting emphasis of certain positions, debates, methodologies, problem sets or traditions, over others, may facilitate the use of a historical narrative for assessing the novelty or conservativeness of a contemporary position.

It might be tempting to try to state these observations with more precision. For example, we might try to distinguish different strengths of conservativeness in the following way. A weakly conservative view conforms to each member of a contrast class, where each member is a contemporary or recent view (and similarly for positions, theories, methodologies, problem sets, and so on). Conformity might be cashed out in terms of resemblance, or consistency. A strongly conservative view, on the other hand, conforms to each member of a contrast class, where each member is a contemporary or historical view; the more inclusive the contrast class – the more views, but also the longer period of time from which views are drawn – the stronger the conservativeness. Different strengths of novelty might be characterized similarly.

The assessment of values, however, resists quantification. And novelty and conservativeness is not easily assessed in terms of difference from, or conformity to, other views. A new proposal might be similar or dissimilar to others in a wide variety of ways. Judgements on whether a proposal is, all things considered, novel or conservative, is delicate and highly context sensitive. And indeed, the judgement whether a proposal is, all things considered, novel or conservative, may be neither possible nor desirable to make. The application of assessments of novelty or conservativeness need not proceed by first forming an all things considered judgement. It is better to have a nuanced view of the various ways in which a contemporary position is novel or conservative relative to a history.

So to sum up the story so far. A historical narrative contributes to the assessment of conservativeness and novelty. This may subsequently contribute to epistemic and societal evaluations of positions and theories. But it is especially relevant to cognitive evaluations – setting a research agenda, choosing a problem set, selecting a methodology and presenting results. We have wanted a role for scholarship on the history of philosophy within contemporary philosophical practice that meets several desiderata. Although the contribution of a historical narrative is not indispensable to philosophical progress, it is distinctive, and not replicable by nonhistorical considerations. It is a contribution which cannot be delivered by just a list of the contemporary rivals, by a synchronic repository of possible positions or even by a chronology. Moreover, the contribution of a historical narrative is not dependent on contingencies such the presence of vestiges, questionable contemporary assumptions, or comparable intuitions.

5 | A CASE STUDY

In this penultimate section, I will discuss a case study. The discussion will flesh out the role of values in directing research agenda, and so illustrate one instrumental benefit scholarship on the history of philosophy offers to the contemporary practice of philosophy. I have discussed the specific issues raised in the case study at length in Corkum (2020), and since my aim is to illustrate certain historically informed cognitive evaluations, and not to argue in detail for or against specific claims, I will be brief here. I will lay out the philosophical issue, and then turn to its history.

Grounding, a noncausal relation of dependence, has received much recent attention. Adopting Wilson's (2014) terminology, there are a variety of small-g grounding relations that already had been heavily discussed in the literature. This list includes mereological composition, under which

the arrangement of parts determines the whole; material constitution, under which the material builds up the hylomorphic compound; set formation, under which a set is determined solely by its members; realization, under which for example a physicalist would hold that a phenomenological state is nothing over and above its corresponding physical state; and microbased determination, under which the microphysical facts exhaustively explain the macrophysical facts.

Is there a relation unifying these small-g relations? And if so, is this relation of grounding a single relation, a genus under which the small-g relations fall as species, a determinable of which the small-g relations are determinate relata, a natural resemblance class or a mere family resemblance class? There is reason to doubt that grounding is just a single particular relation. For example, Bennett (2017) argues against the view that there is a single relation of grounding (or in her preferred terminology, building) operative in all cases of small-g grounding. Since two components, *a* and *b*, can build both the mereological sum *a*+*b* and the set {*a*, *b*}, there must be some difference between mereological composition and set formation which a single relation of grounding would be unable to capture.

But grounding sceptics such as Wilson (2014) and Koslicki (2015, 2020) doubt that there is any relation at all unifying the small-g relations. Grounding enthusiasts looking for unity might appeal to features shared among the small-g relations. For example, grounding is often characterized as a strict partial ordering. But simply being a strict partial ordering is insufficient to be a grounding relation: the < relation is a strict partial ordering on the natural numbers but is not thereby a grounding relation. Moreover, the various small-g relations fail to exhibit shared features. The part relation is arguably transitive, but set formation is not. And the characterization of grounding as a strict partial ordering has become controversial. Talk of grounding then risks appearing to be too coarse grained to be useful.

On the other hand, there are reasons to pursue further talk of grounding. Some theorists hold that there are cases of noncausal determination not easily subsumed under one of the established small-g relations. Grounding also may be a useful umbrella term for discussing generally a family of noncausal determination relations, even if there are not formal features common to all members of that family, even if there is not a single relation operative in every case, even if there is not a genus of which the small-g relations are species, and so on.

Is there grounding in the history of philosophy? To restrict our attention, consider one example from ancient philosophy. In the *Euthyphro*, Plato has the character of Socrates ask the question, “is that which is pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?” (*Euthyphro* 10a, my translation, based on Cooper in Hamilton and Cairns (1961)). The *Euthyphro* question is commonly used when illustrating grounding: for some recent examples, see Raven (2013), Bliss and Trogdon (2016), Schaffer (2016) and Maurin (2019), among others. These authors seem to view the *Euthyphro* question as seeking to distinguish, from among facts about which things are pious and facts about which things are god-loved, the relatively fundamental from the relatively derivative.

Plato views the question somewhat differently. Socrates’ interlocutor, the character of *Euthyphro*, canvasses the answer that “it is because it is pious that it is loved; it is not pious because it is loved” (*Euthyphro* 10d) but Socrates rejects this answer: “*Euthyphro*, it looks as if you had not given me my answer—as if when you were asked to tell the nature of the pious, you did not wish to explain the essence of it. You merely tell an attribute of it, namely, that it appertains to piety to be loved by all the gods. What it is, as yet you have not said” (*Euthyphro* 11a). Socrates seeks a definitional account of piety. Being god-loved is an attribute of the pious, not the essence of what it is to be pious, and so is ill-suited for supplying a *definiens*. When further attempts in the

dialogue to define piety prove fruitless, and merely circle back to the attribute of being god-loved, Euthyphro makes a quick exit, and the dialogue suddenly ends.

Plato's concern in the *Euthyphro*, then, is to specify criteria for being a *definiens*, and arguably does not concern a more robust notion of grounding or noncausal determination. Is there other evidence for grounding in the *Euthyphro*? Correia and Schnieder (2013, pp. 2–4), in a brief but engaging discussion of the *Euthyphro*, note that Plato's argument draws on features associated with grounding. For example, Euthyphro endorses the claim that if something is pious, it is pious because it is god-beloved, and Socrates concludes that it follows that if something is pious, it is pious because the gods love it. This inference is licensed by the explicitly made claim that if something is god-beloved, it is so because the gods love it, and by the tacit assumption that 'because'-clauses chain; as Correia and Schnieder put it, Plato assumes that grounding is transitive. But this and the other features discussed by Correia and Schnieder are logical characteristics of 'because'-clauses, and so are features shared by grounding and other explanatory notions such as causation. They do not on their own provide conclusive evidence for there being grounding in the *Euthyphro*.

It is then not obvious that Plato recognized anything like grounding. If we view grounding thinly, as merely the correlate of the *in virtue of* relation, then it would be fairly uncontroversial that many historical figures tacitly canvass ground. But most contemporary authors view grounding more thickly. For example, many grounding theorists view grounding as a relation among facts. If the ascription of grounding commits one to an ontology of facts, then ascribing grounding to Plato might saddle him with anachronistic commitments.

It may strike the reader that the Euthyphro question is a narrow topic, and that the question whether there is grounding in the *Euthyphro* is an artifact of the discussion within contemporary metaphysics rather than a question that arises from the interests and methodologies of historians. (Thanks to an anonymous reader for expressing the worry.) But the more general question whether there is grounding in ancient philosophy has received recent attention. A partial survey over the last ten years or so of ancient scholars canvassing or criticizing the ascription of grounding to ancient authors includes discussions of grounding and kindred notions in Plato (Thomas 2014), Aristotle's *De Anima* (Cohoe 2016), Plotinus (Cohoe 2017), and Aristotelian demonstration (Malink 2020, Sandstad forthcoming). Furthermore, the question whether grounding in ancient philosophy lends the contemporary discussion novel or conservative value cannot be separated from an appreciation of the question of grounding's presence or absence from the long history of philosophy that connects us to antiquity. And historians working on periods after ancient philosophy discuss grounding in medieval philosophy (Cameron 2020, Ward forthcoming), modern philosophy (Embry 2017, Schechtman 2018, Cameron 2020, Puryear 2020), Bolzano (Roski 2017, Roski 2019, Roski and Schnieder 2019, Roski 2020) and Austro-German phenomenology (Mulligan 2020). Notice, however, that the potential influence of historical scholarship on the contemporary discussion of grounding is not limited to historical work that explicitly references grounding. Grounding relations concern dependence and connect the relatively fundamental with the relatively derivative. And so contemporary discussion of grounding intersects with topics on ontological dependence, fundamentality, metaphysical foundationalism, substance ontology, the principle of sufficient reason, and so on. Needless to say, the history of philosophy contains a wealth of discussion on these topics.

A historically informed evaluation of the novelty or conservativeness of grounding may influence decisions regarding the need to critically assess the role of grounding in metaphysics and to respond to grounding scepticism. I do not claim that such historical considerations replace other considerations. But if it can be shown that grounding has a long history in metaphysics, then that

goes some way towards mitigating concerns over the intelligibility and applicability of the notion of grounding. Or rather, the burden of proof shifts somewhat towards the grounding sceptic needing to make a case in order to throw shade on an unitary notion of grounding. Or at very least, scepticism then would be best pitched as exposing a long standing and perhaps deeply entrenched error, rather than as questioning a recent and untested innovation. On the other hand, if grounding is a novel notion, this might encourage further study, but also make pressing the need to defend the initial plausibility and utility of the notion. Of course, the arguments made by the grounding sceptic might well succeed, and trump the historical considerations, regardless of whether the history shows that grounding is a novel or a conservative notion. But the assessment of novelty and conservativeness influences sociological aspects of contemporary philosophical practice, partly guiding research agenda, argumentative strategy, and the presentation of results. In weighing the worthiness of a research agenda in grounding, and the urgency of responding to grounding scepticism, a historically informed evaluation of the novelty or conservativeness of grounding is one of the several considerations in play.

6 | OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

To bring the paper to a conclusion, I will briefly respond to a few objections. First, one might object that the proposal that historical scholarship has instrumental value for contemporary philosophy since it can contribute to the assessment of certain cognitive values, is too narrow; historical scholarship can make a contribution in a wide variety of ways.

In response, although I have noted that the role that historical scholarship can play in the assessment of certain cognitive values is understudied and worth closer study, I do not claim that the instrumental value of historical scholarship lies solely in its contribution to the assessment of novelty and conservativeness. Recall, I do not deny that historical scholarship can contribute in other ways. Historical research can indeed expose vestiges, provide alternatives to contemporary assumptions, and calibrate intuitions. Such roles, however, fail to meet certain reasonable desiderata: they are replicable by other methods; they are reliant on contingencies such as the presence of vestiges, questionable assumptions and comparable intuitions; and they arguably fail to explain why historical scholarship as such – the articulation of a historical narrative, rather than a mere list or chronology of positions – is valuable to contemporary philosophical practice. For what it is worth, the assessment of novelty and conservativeness meets these criteria. Notice that I also do not deny that there may be other roles for historical scholarship within contemporary philosophy that meet these desiderata. I do not know what kind of argument could show that it is *only* through the assessment of novelty and conservativeness that historical scholarship has instrumental value that is nonreplicable, noncontingent and legitimately historical.

Next, a *tu quoque* objection. I object to the contingency of identifying vestiges, providing alternatives to questionable contemporary assumptions, or drawing on comparable intuitions. But vestiges, challengeable contemporary assumptions and comparable intuitions are pervasive. So why care that history is merely contingently useful, if it is very often useful in these ways? Moreover, the objection might continue, the novelty or conservativeness of a contemporary position, relative to historical views, is also highly contingent.

In response, let me repeat that the exposure of vestiges, the provision of alternatives to questionable contemporary assumptions, the gauging of intuitions, and so on, are useful and commonly available roles for historical scholarship. Moreover, historical scholarship plays a role in the determination whether there are vestiges, challengeable assumptions or comparable intuitions, even

when the answer is no. But if it turns out that there are no vestiges, say, historical scholarship plays no further role. Determining whether there are vestiges does not in itself contribute to contemporary philosophical practice; rather, it determines whether a contribution can be made. By contrast, although it is contingent which of novelty or conservativeness a contemporary position exhibits, and to what degree, it is not contingent that it has value along these parameters.

Finally, a weak tea objection: the role for historical scholarship canvassed in this paper is excessively modest, contributing only to the assessment of novelty and conservativeness, and so merely influencing the sociology of philosophy.

In response, recall that the values of novelty and conservativeness may not be solely cognitive values. As discussed above, in the right context, these values may be truth conducive. And so the impact of historical scholarship might extend beyond sociological factors such as the choice of research agendas, methodologies and problem sets. But moreover, let us not underestimate the impact sociological factors has on philosophical practice. Readers might be inclined to view such considerations as peripheral to philosophy. We are concerned with what positions are true, what arguments are sound, what objections are pressing – we are less concerned with the process by which true positions, sound arguments, or pressing objections are developed. One of my aims in this paper has been to draw attention to the sociology of philosophy. Progress is often made through the setting and revising of research agendas, methodologies and problem sets, through the choice of argumentative strategy, and through decisions concerning the presentation of results. Our case study in the previous section illustrated the influence questions of novelty and conservativeness can have on these factors. So even were historical scholarship of instrumental value solely due to these aspects of philosophical practice, it would not be of merely peripheral value.

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