

2 Understanding the question

Philosophy and its history

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1 Introduction

What is the relevance of the history of philosophy to philosophy as such? This is not the question, what is the reason for studying the history of philosophy? This question is easy to answer. Philosophy is part of our culture, and the history of our culture is worth studying, if anything is. Nor is it the question, should academic institutions teach the history of philosophy as part of a philosophical education? It is widely accepted that students should be taught the history of philosophy, even if philosophy itself is not considered an essentially historical discipline. An education in the history of philosophy is part of a broadly humanistic university education, and something of value for this reason alone, without it being necessary for anyone who actually pursues philosophy creatively and systematically to have to take history into account.

The question is rather what relevance the history of philosophy has for philosophy, considered as a creative, systematic discipline? Why should philosophers engaged in the pursuit of philosophical questions take any notice of the history of the subject? The question has, of course, been asked many times. One common answer is that history is relevant today because it enables philosophers to avoid the errors of the past: this is an application to philosophy of Santayana's famous claim that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it. This 'prophylactic' answer has some value, but it is hard to believe it is the whole story. After all, there are so many errors to avoid, and it would be an industrious philosopher who felt the need to pursue the sources of all of them in the writers of the past. More to the point, there is no reason why they should.

Another answer is that we should study the great philosophers simply because they are better than we are. Their longevity is some evidence of their greatness, and their texts are worth mining for insights which lesser minds of today might miss. These insights might be truths which the works of the great philosophers contain, or neglected ways of looking at things, or some other kind of illumination. Although there is surely something right about this, the approach fails to explain why we think views which we cannot possibly believe are relevant to genuine philosophical inquiry. I don't think we continue to read Leibniz, Spinoza and Berkeley only because we have not yet ruled out the possibility that their texts

might contain some nugget of truth. The ‘nugget’ approach, like the ‘prophylactic’ approach, does not give an adequate answer to our question.

The answer I will give here is somewhat different. I will argue that unless we have some genuine historical awareness of the origin and source of the problems we are addressing, we cannot claim that we really know what these problems are. I will argue this by arguing for the following claims:

- (1) A philosophical tradition is constituted by a historically constituted collection of canonical texts, together with a certain way of reading these texts;
- (2) It is only by locating the questions philosophers ask in relation to a philosophical tradition that we can make real sense of these questions.

It follows from these two claims that we can only make real sense of the questions philosophers ask by locating them in relation to a historically constituted collection of canonical texts. How exactly one does this—what ‘locating’ and ‘making real sense’ really mean—is a complex matter that does not have one simple answer. Here I will suggest an answer that does not rely on one particular philosophical method and applies to different philosophical traditions. My answer will also help us in the attempt to understand the difference between ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ philosophy.

I realize that claims (1) and (2) will strike some philosophers as obvious or trivial. But they will also strike some as deeply misguided. My aim here is to persuade both these groups of philosophers that they are wrong, and that in recognizing this we may go some way to realizing what is wrong with some of the usual ways of thinking of the relationship between philosophy and its history.

2 Tradition: texts and interpretation

My first claim is about the nature of traditions in philosophy: traditions are historically constituted collections of canonical texts, together with a certain way of reading them. While many will take this as obvious, I suspect that some analytic philosophers will dispute it, for the reason that the analytic tradition is essentially constituted not by its texts, but by a particular *style*, or a *method*, or a specific collection of *problems*, or a collection of *doctrines*. Style, method, problems and doctrines are important for characterizing philosophers, of course; but I claim that they only constitute the elements of a tradition in the context of a set of canonical texts. This is not the kind of claim that could be proved by some kind of deductive argument. I will rather defend it in two different ways: by looking at some features of the traditions themselves; and by disputing some other ways of looking at traditions.

First, let me begin with some obvious facts about the ‘analytic’ tradition in philosophy. There is no agreed-upon definition of analytic philosophy; but this does not mean that there is no such thing. Analytic philosophy is an almost entirely academic enterprise, in the sense that it takes place largely in universities. Like other academic disciplines, it has a sense of itself as a profession, with its own

norms and standards, training and career advancement. When analytic philosophers say that someone is ‘not really a philosopher’, they do not mean that the person in question is not interested in the big questions of time, existence or morality (say). They normally mean that the person has not had this kind of philosophical training, and does not address these questions in the way that trained analytic philosophers do.

Analytic philosophy is without question the dominant contemporary tradition in academic philosophy in the universities of the USA, the UK and Australasia; and it also has a strong representation in continental Europe, notably in Scandinavia and Germany. Those who are part of this tradition tend to reject contributions from other traditions either by dismissing them as not really philosophy, or even as fraud or bullshit; or more defensively, as part of another tradition of which they are, regrettably or not, ignorant.

But what makes this tradition the tradition it is? The answer stares out from the opening pages of books about analytic philosophy: there we are told that analytic philosophy had its origin either in the logical and mathematical works of Frege, or in the rebellion against the British Hegelians by Russell and Moore, or in some combination of these two philosophical moments. These views about its historical origins then form the basis of the selection canonical texts of the tradition: *Über Sinn und Bedeutung*, the *Grundlagen*, ‘On Denoting’, *The Problems of Philosophy*, *Principia Ethica*, the *Tractatus*, the *Philosophical Investigations*, ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’, *A Theory of Justice*, *Naming and Necessity* and so on—these are the kinds of texts one has to have read if one is to speak authoritatively within the tradition as a whole. However, there are of course slightly different canons for different schools within the tradition—in some places, the writings of Wilfrid Sellars might be canonical; in others, Rudolf Carnap, or J. L. Austin, and so on.

Are there texts which are members of any canon within the analytic tradition? There no doubt are, and it is an (interesting) empirical question which texts these are; but not one I will address here. What I do want to emphasize, however, is that the occurrence of a text in an analytic canon is not sufficient to make that text a work of analytic philosophy in itself. Work by uncontroversially ‘continental’ philosophers has been studied and made use of by analytic philosophers: texts by Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger are obvious examples. Going further back, Kant is seen as an originator of analytic and continental traditions, and he is probably the most obvious example of a thinker whose texts are treated as canonical by both traditions. Traditions are defined by their canonical texts, but texts can belong to more than one tradition.

What this shows is that we need to mention more than just a list of texts if we want to characterize a tradition. We also need to mention the way of reading those texts. This is partly a matter of how we approach the text critically: do we try and find out what arguments or reasons philosophers give for their views within the texts in question? Or do we relate their concerns back to the philosophers they were reacting to? Or do we look at their social and political context in order to understand why they put forward the views they did? One thing that is central to these endeavours is trying to find out what question it is that they are

addressing, or that their work can be used to address. To do this, we need not assume that the philosophers themselves saw this question as central; and it would not necessarily invalidate this reading of the philosopher if it were shown that this question were not central to their work.

So for example, Michael Dummett is well-known for his interpretation of Frege, and this interpretation has had a significant impact on Frege's place in the canon. Dummett's first book was called *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, and one of its themes was that Frege put philosophy of language at the centre of his philosophy. Dummett argues that according to Frege, an account of thought can only be given through an account of language. This had the effect of making some of Frege's writings more canonical than others: 'Der Gedanke' and 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung' are central to the canon, whereas some of Frege's more mathematical writings are not. This is because the question at issue is the one Dummett has posed on Frege's behalf—how does thought connect to reality? Dummett's answer is that Frege thinks that thought connects to reality through language connecting to reality, hence the centrality of the theory of sense and reference.

Critics of Dummett have objected to his imposing this vision of things onto Frege (see, e.g., Sluga 1980; Weiner 1999). According to some of these critics, Frege was not primarily a philosopher of language at all. His primary concern was with the foundations of mathematics and our knowledge of mathematics. However, it is important to realize that even if this is correct, it does not invalidate Dummett's question. Dummett sees the question for philosophy as being one about 'giving an account of thought'. No one should deny that this is a legitimate question, even if they think other questions are more important or more central to the work of certain thinkers. Dummett treats Frege as his precursor in this enterprise, and even if he is wrong about Frege's actual concerns, the fact that he treats Frege as such, and that this has helped to sustain Frege's writings as part of the canon is itself a significant fact about the analytic canon. So it is possible simultaneously to see Dummett as wrong about what Frege's actual concerns were, and yet right that his writings can be read in a way in which they are seen to be addressing the concerns of late twentieth-century philosophy.

In effect, Dummett 'co-opts' Frege, so to speak, as sharing a concern he has, as attempting to answer a question which he wants answered. In a similar way, analytic philosophers can co-opt philosophers whose works are canonical in different traditions, to help understand and answer the questions that are their central concerns. So, for example, Hubert Dreyfus has used ideas from Heidegger's early work as part of his attempt to draw a picture of the mind as essentially involving an active, embodied worldliness, as part of a critique of what are sometimes called 'Cartesian' preoccupations in epistemology and philosophy of mind. It is fairly uncontroversial, I think, to all except a few diehard 'Dreyfusards', that this is a selective misrepresentation of Heidegger's philosophical project. But once again, it is intelligible to hold that Dreyfus has Heidegger wrong, but also that he has made a case that Heidegger's ideas can be incorporated into the answer to the question which he himself is asking.

The relationship between traditions and canonical texts is therefore a complex one, mediated by a concern with questions that both derive from a philosophical

tradition and are also read back into that tradition. The view being defended here is not that there is a set menu of questions, and that philosophers misinterpret the views of past philosophers so as to use their work to answer these questions. This would be to suggest that the menu of the central, or important, or legitimate philosophical questions is already fixed in some way, and using the works of past philosophers is just one way to go about answering them.

The truth is rather that there is no set menu of questions. The questions evolve over time, and they arise partly because of the way we read the philosophers of the past. Which philosophers we read depends on the canonical texts of the tradition, but the way in which we read them depends also on the dominant concerns of the tradition. Some dominant concerns of analytic philosophy have been: a concern with realism, with accommodating the knowledge gained by science into a coherent philosophy, with logic and its relationship to human thought, with systematic (as opposed to ‘critical’) theorizing about language, mind, value and reality, and so on. It is because of these concerns that analytic philosophers have pursued the ideas of thinkers of the past; but their understanding of those concerns shapes, and is shaped by, the readings of those thinkers. So, just as Dummett’s understanding of the problems of the philosophy of language shapes his reading of Frege as a philosopher—as the philosopher who put questions about language at the heart of philosophy—so his reading of Frege shapes his understanding of the problem space (e.g., that the notion of reference must play a role in the theory of meaning; sense is something ‘objective’ and mind-independent—etc.). Similarly, just as the contemporary understanding of the problem of scepticism shapes our understanding of Kant’s project—the refutation of scepticism, and the response to the challenge posed by Hume—so Kant’s own ideas shape our understanding of the available problem space (empirical vs transcendental idealism, etc.).

A philosophical tradition, then, is a collection of canonical texts together with a way of reading those texts in the light of the central questions of the tradition. The central questions of the tradition both arise from the canonical texts and also affect (or infect) the readings of those texts.

Analytic philosophy, I claim, is a tradition in this sense. In late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century philosophical discourse, analytic philosophy is often contrasted with continental philosophy. Continental philosophy is a tradition (or collection of traditions) in this sense too. Of course, continental philosophy cannot be characterized in the same way as analytic philosophy, partly because many (indeed, most) of the leading continental philosophers did not (or do not) describe themselves as such. This is one of the many reasons why the term ‘continental’ is so unsatisfactory. It goes without saying that Nietzsche and Heidegger did not think of themselves as ‘continental’ philosophers, of course; but the same is true of many leading contemporary figures in French philosophy like Alain Badiou or Jacques Ranciere. In a similar way to analytic philosophers, these figures sometimes represent what they do simply as ‘philosophy’, without any explicit acknowledgement that others do it in a different way.

However, even if the term is unsatisfactory, and few continental philosophers self-identify as such, it is undeniable that there is such a thing, and it is just as

recognizable as analytic philosophy. Continental philosophy draws its undisputed canonical texts from the works of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Bergson, Husserl and Heidegger and others—in the sense that anyone educating themselves within this tradition would be expected to gain knowledge of the central texts of these authors at least. Continental philosophy is no more one single thing than analytic philosophy is; there are Marxist, psychoanalytic and phenomenological traditions within the overall tradition labelled ‘continental’. But the reality of the tradition justifies one label, however vague it might be around the edges.

Among the many kinds of thing picked out with this label, we should distinguish two things. First, there is the group of thinkers, mostly nineteenth- and twentieth-century German philosophers, who would figure in any history of continental philosophy since Kant (see Leiter and Rosen 2010). And second, there is continental philosophy as it is currently practised by those in recognizably ‘continental’ institutions, whether or not these are departments of philosophy, or literature or some other discipline. Some commentators have argued that the label ‘continental’ can be as sensibly applied to thinkers in the first group (e.g., Hegel, Nietzsche) as to those in the second, and that thinkers in the first group can be studied using the methods and style of analytic philosophy. They conclude that there is therefore no real philosophical distinction between continental philosophy and the rest of philosophy, and that those who claim otherwise are misleadingly appropriating thinkers from the first group in order to serve their academic political purposes, or to isolate themselves from philosophical criticism.

However, when I talk here about continental philosophy, I mean philosophy of the second kind. Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century German thinkers have been discussed in the analytic tradition—Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, etc.—and this does not eliminate the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy as it is institutionally realized. Indeed, the explanation I have just given of the nature of traditions would explain why this is so: thinkers can be co-opted by a current tradition when writers within that tradition consider that these thinkers have some way of posing or answering the questions within it, or of showing what is wrong with the current questions or their answers. So it is with Bernard Williams’s use of Nietzsche, for example, or Robert Brandom’s use of Hegel.

Continental philosophy as it is currently practised has post-war French philosophy at its heart. Continental thinkers do discuss Nietzsche and Heidegger, of course, but the conversation has been going on for some time, and is typically developed through the readings of more recent twentieth-century thinkers. Unless you are yourself already a canonical figure, you will not get very far in a continental philosophy journal if you simply attempt to interpret Nietzsche in your own terms, as opposed to taking into account the readings of Nietzsche which various continental philosophers have offered. (*Mutatis mutandis* the same is true, of course, of analytic philosophy: you are unlikely to get very far by proposing a wholly new reading of Frege which takes no account of the way his ideas have been read by the thinkers of the analytic tradition.)

Post-war French philosophy has been dominated by three themes, as Alain Badiou points out in his recent book, *The Adventure of French Philosophy* (2012). One

is political engagement, by which he (in effect) means engagement with Marxist thought of various kinds, often contextualized by reflection on the events in Paris of 1968. The second is psychoanalysis, which is normally approached via readings of Lacan, and his followers. The third is literature, with which a number twentieth-century French philosophers have been involved, Sartre being an obvious example (but Badiou himself is a novelist too). If you wanted something which constitutes the essence of continental philosophy you would not go far wrong by starting with these three themes. But the themes alone are not enough: the canonical texts are needed to give a structure to the discussion of the themes.

So far I have tried to draw a general picture of some traditions in philosophy and how they develop, in broad outlines. It is worth making explicit that my aim here is not to endorse or justify the classification of works as analytic or continental. I am not saying that this is a good or bad way to divide up areas of philosophy; I am only saying that it is, as a matter of fact, the way people do divide these things up, for good or ill, and so I am giving a descriptive, external account of how they come to be divided in this way.

There are, of course, alternative accounts of what characterizes and divides the traditions. It is common for analytic philosophers to recognize that their traditions have historical origins, which help to define the tradition. But they tend to resist the idea that the story of these origins is what characterizes analytic philosophy as a whole. They prefer to say that the origins are one thing, and the methods or techniques of analytic philosophy are something different. I want to reject this approach. I don't think that there is any way to specify the method or style of analytic philosophy independently of the paradigms of the philosophical texts which form its canon. I have discussed elsewhere how neither an appeal to 'logic' nor an appeal to 'science' can give a distinctive method or style to analytic philosophy (Crane 2011). I would now like to make a few remarks about the idea of argument.

It is undoubtedly true that analytic philosophy places great importance on argument, and its texts are full of arguments. But the history of philosophy from Plato to Kant is full of arguments too, and many of these arguments are recognizably the same kind of thing as you find in the twentieth-century analytic tradition. Some respond to this triumphantly by claiming that this just shows that all good philosophy in the past was analytic really, or at least that the analytic ideal was alive and well before the late nineteenth century. This is misleading, to say the least, since it hard to combine with the historical claim (which few deny) that analytic philosophy was invented in Cambridge by Russell and Moore. This claim is not that Russell and Moore were simply rediscovering the methods of argument that were used by Descartes and Kant, which had somehow been lost in the era of Bradley, Green and McTaggart. On the contrary: there are plenty of arguments in Bradley and McTaggart. On the usual historical conception of the origins of analytical philosophy, Russell and Moore were not rediscovering anything: they had invented something new.

What then is the role of argument in analytic philosophy? An 'argument' can be a series of premises leading deductively to a conclusion; more broadly, it can be the presentation of the reasons for believing something without any claim to

deductive validity; or more broadly still, it can be the description of a philosophical vision, for example, the invitation to approach a question in a new way. It seems to me that some of the most famous arguments in the history of analytic philosophy—for example, Quine's argument in 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' against the analytic–synthetic distinction—are really of this last form. Presented in terms of its premises and its conclusion, Quine's argument is hardly convincing: why should a defender of the notion of analyticity be concerned with the fact that the notion cannot be explained independently of notions such as sameness of meaning? But when understood as an attempt to persuade the reader to look at the question of meaning in a new way, to stop thinking in terms of a sharp distinction between truths of meaning and truths of fact, the argument is much more effective. In fact, I doubt whether many of those who were persuaded of Quine's conclusion were persuaded by the arguments about synonymy, etc.; much more effective, surely, was the alternative vision he created.

Arguments of this broader kind are common in analytic philosophy, and it would distort the phenomena to insist that the only parts of the tradition which properly deserve the name 'analytic' are those arguments that are put in terms of a conclusion derived deductively from premises. It would be even more fanciful to insist that everything that counts as a piece of analytic philosophy can be reconstructed in these terms. Once we recognize the variety of things that count as arguments in analytic philosophy, we can free ourselves from the idea that deductive validity is the only ideal to which the tradition aspires. In doing this, we should then accept that argument in this sense is neither necessary nor sufficient for a piece of philosophy to belong to the analytic tradition.

My first claim, then, is that a tradition is constituted by a collection of canonical texts, together with a way of reading those texts. A text may belong to more than one tradition, and the reading of the text within a particular tradition will be prompted by the prior questions of the tradition, which themselves have a history within the tradition. I cannot claim to have proved or established that this is the essence of a philosophical tradition; but in my view no alternative conception of traditions is adequate.

3 Making sense of philosophical questions

The second premise in my main argument is that it is only in the context of a philosophical tradition that we can make real sense of the questions that philosophers ask.

Philosophical problems can be understood in more or less detail, of course; and I don't mean that no one can understand anything about a problem by looking at it outside the context of its historical development. And nor do I mean that one needs to understand the extraphilosophical circumstances that led to the construction of the great works of the past in order to grasp their content. My emphasis is rather on the idea of a philosophical tradition, as characterized above. The point I want to make is that the questions we ask can be best understood in the context of the texts which prompted them.

I will illustrate this with a problem which has been at the focus of some of my own philosophical work: the mind–body problem. This problem is typically introduced by asking whether mind and body (or mental states and physical states) are distinct. It is then normal to list the standard answers to this question: they are distinct (dualism) or they are not (materialism or physicalism, with idealism sometimes offered as a wacky alternative). Varieties of dualism—property vs substance—are introduced and so are varieties of physicalism: reductive vs non-reductive. The debate then continues as to which of these options is correct, employing arguments about consciousness, mental causation, variable realization, zombies, the possibility of disembodied existence and so on.

But why would one ask whether mind and body were distinct in the first place? Why does this question arise? Is it the sort of question that would occur to any reflective person if they were to contemplate aspects of our existence? Maybe; but the absence of this particular way of thinking in some other philosophical traditions should make us pause. Of course, speculations about our mental capacities and our consciousness can arise in many ways. In contemporary intellectual culture, the discussion often starts with the idea that there must be some neural explanation for everything, or that there can't be such an explanation; but this is a different question from whether mind and body are distinct.

It's important to recognize here that the analytic discussion of the mind–body problem does not simply allow for just *any* kind of speculation about the mind and its embodiment. Speculations have to be fitted, on the whole, into the template provided by the various forms of materialism and dualism (sometimes with idealism added). This is not meant as a criticism of the standard debate; the debate provides a structure within which philosophers can precisify and refine their positions without having to start *ab initio* in every discussion. But nonetheless the debate is constrained; my suggestion is that the debate is constrained by its history, and that an examination of the history shows you what kind of question the mind–body question really is.

Love it or hate it, the classic historical text in the philosophy of mind is Descartes's *Meditations*. There was, of course, philosophy of mind before Descartes, but Descartes's work is the place where the modern conception of the mind was articulated. This is a conception which made 'thought' in a very broad sense the mark of the mental, and relegated the functions of the soul as identified by Aristotle into merely mechanical activities. One of Descartes's aims in this book is to establish what he called the 'real distinction' between mind and body, and he provided a number of famous arguments for this distinction. The upshot of his discussion is his dualism, and his opponents propose the various forms of materialism in response.

Things could have gone differently. The threefold Aristotelian idea of the soul—the vegetative, sensitive and rational souls—might not have been abandoned as it was in the seventeenth century, and instead of discussing the real distinction between mind and body, we might have been discussing the relationship between the various faculties of the soul. Those who see Descartes's influence in framing the debate as largely negative may consider this a preferable

alternative. Here I am not discussing whether our predicament is in some ways undesirable, however; I am just describing the predicament itself.

My claim is illustrated, I think, by the fact that it is typical even for the least historically minded philosophers to introduce their view of the metaphysics of mind in relation to Descartes, Berkeley or Leibniz, say; or in relation to more recent writers such as Lewis and Armstrong. There is not usually an extensive scholarly discussion of these texts, but there is nonetheless a point to introducing thinkers like this: it places a marker as to what the terms of the debate are, and the context in which the acceptable positions arise. The positions arise because of the debate that we have inherited. Positions are not simply picked out of the thinkers' minds, as if they were things that any self-conscious and reflective philosopher would come up with in a free afternoon. The available positions are presented as they are because they seem the only available ones possible given the framework of the problem as it has been introduced in the philosophical discussions over the decades. In other words, positions arise as they do in relation to the canonical texts.

It is possible for thinkers to attempt to break the mould even when working within a particular tradition. Wittgenstein was preoccupied with breaking out of the mindset or picture that led to what he saw as the apparently inevitable yet spurious choice between materialism, dualism and behaviourism. Some of his followers have attempted to pursue this agenda, without conspicuous success. More conservatively, Donald Davidson's anomalous monism (1970) was recognized as a genuinely new option in the metaphysics of mind, and was soon added to the list of alternative positions (how long it will stay on that list remains to be seen at the time of writing). Others, like John Searle (1992), have attempted to reject the entire framework of materialism and dualism. Searle argues that even thinking in terms of materialism versus dualism presents us with unacceptable choices: the mental-as-opposed-to-the-physical versus the-physical-as-opposed-to-the-mental. The fact that Searle's alternative way of thinking did not shift the debate may have as much to do with the ingrained ways of thinking of the tradition as it does with any inadequacies of Searle's own presentation of his views.

My claim, then, is that the range of positions available in response to a question is established by the tradition, where a tradition is understood as a collection of canonical texts and a way of reading those texts, as outlined above. My final point is to link this claim to the idea of understanding a philosophical question.

To understand a question is not just to understand its constituent words, but in many cases it also involves knowing what kind of thing would count as an acceptable answer to it. Someone who walks into the kitchen and says 'where's the milk?' would be expecting an answer of a certain kind: in the fridge, on the table, in the cupboard ... Some answers would be more surprising but possible (in the washing machine, on the floor) but others would be sensible answers only in jest (still in the cow). If you ask who a certain person is at a social event, you expect to be told their name, or a description of them, or their title, or be given an admission of ignorance. Asking a question is a request for information, and often the conversational context narrows down the kind of information one is after.

One may also answer a question by attempting to subvert it: by showing that it rests on some false presupposition, or that some of the concepts in terms of which it is expressed are confused. When Bob Dylan was asked by a journalist how many protest singers there were, he replied ‘either 136 or 142’. Questions can be subverted or undermined by mockery, humour or an explanation of the incoherence of the concepts being used.

All of these things happen with philosophical questions too. When David Bourget and David Chalmers published their recent survey of academic philosophers’ opinions, they asked questions in the form ‘A Priori Knowledge: Accept or Lean Towards, Yes or No’ with the option of answering by ticking ‘other’ (Bourget and Chalmers 2014). In 20 of the 30 questions, the largest percentage of participants opted either for the yes or no answers, indicating some consensus about the acceptable range of answers to these questions. But interestingly, for 10 questions, ‘other’ got the largest percentage. What this exactly means will depend on the question under discussion. But it is highly likely that philosophers in these cases will be unhappy with the way in which the question is posed; they think it is not a straightforward yes/no question, and maybe they will want to dismantle or undermine the presuppositions of the question. The lesson I draw from this is not just that analytic philosophers do not regard all their questions as yes/no questions, but that often the meaning of the question itself is something that is contestable.

How should these observations about traditions help us in our actual attempts to answer philosophical questions? How should knowledge of history affect the practice of systematic philosophy? Although I’m sceptical of the value and effectiveness of telling people how to philosophize, I would like to draw three tentative morals.

The first is that some awareness the history of a question can help us to understand better what the question really is, and what admissible answers to the questions might be for us today. To take the example of the mind–body problem, a clear understanding of what Descartes meant by ‘substance’ will help us understand what ‘substance dualism’ really is, whether it is a credible category for contemporary philosophy, whether we should be thinking in terms of substance at all, and if so, what this means for the formulation of the doctrine of materialism/physicalism.

The second moral is that an awareness of the history of the question one is pursuing can make one sensitive to the contingency of the question, in the sense of the contingency of the philosophical concerns that give rise to it. For example, the formulation of the doctrine of materialism/physicalism in analytic philosophy took a very specific form in the twentieth century—in terms of all truths being expressed in physical language—because of very specific ideas deriving from logical positivism about what philosophy can and cannot do. Reflection on these ideas and their effects can help us see that they are detachable from the core of doctrines like materialism; and dispensing with these assumptions can help us to see the questions in a new light. In some cases, it may help us to move away from the questions altogether, and to pose new questions which make more sense to us today.

My third moral relates to the communication of philosophical ideas. Sometimes those who come across philosophical texts for the first time do not just find

it hard to answer the questions contained in them; they find it hard to know what an answer would even look like. When faced with a question like ‘what is time?’ or ‘what is substance?’ or ‘what is the mind?’, the reaction can be bafflement rather than mere ignorance. Here some historical awareness can help us in removing this sense of incomprehensibility. Rather than just asserting that McTaggart, for example, thought that time was unreal—why would anyone think that?—and asking whether he is right or wrong, we can attempt to give some idea of what it meant for philosophers of this kind to deny the reality of something, to draw out the long tradition of distinguishing between appearance and reality, and how McTaggart’s views fit into that tradition.

The emphasis on the historical origins of our questions is not supposed to show that these questions are pointless or unanswerable; it is not a general-purpose debunking method for the dissolution of philosophy. And nor is it supposed to replace the systematic investigation of questions with a ‘merely’ historical investigation. Rather, it is meant to enhance our understanding both of the questions themselves and the available answers to them, by demonstrating the complex and contingent nature of their origins.

4 Conclusion

G. E. Moore once said that he would not have thought about philosophical problems if it had not been for what other philosophers have said:

I do not think that the world or the sciences would ever have suggested to me any philosophical problems. What has suggested philosophical problems to me is things which other philosophers have said about the world or the sciences.
(Moore 1942: 14)

This is sometimes taken as a sign of Moore’s superficiality—surely, the line of thought goes, philosophical problems just *come to* philosophers who are the real thing, the genuine article? They just think philosophically and don’t need the stimulation of other writers.

Whatever may be true of the motivations of some individual philosophers, it seems to me that when we broaden our view and try and say something about an entire tradition, what Moore says is deeply true. Philosophical questions arise out of philosophical speculation, puzzlement and confusion. But they do this always in the context of what other philosophers have said, and in the context of particular ways of interpreting what they said. My hope is that when this obvious fact is properly absorbed into our practice as philosophers, we will gain a richer understanding of the complex structure of philosophical questions and with it, a more realistic understanding of how we might answer them.¹

1 Thanks to Katalin Farkas and Sacha Golob for discussion of these questions, and to those attending the Philosophical Insights conference at the Institute of Philosophy in London in 2012 for their comments, and to Eugen Fischer and John Collins for organizing this excellent conference.

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