



THE HISTORIAN OF PHILOSOPHY AS A “PORTRAITMAKER”: A BRENTANIAN LOOK ON CONTEXTUALISM-APPROPRIATIONISM DEBATE *

*O historiador da filosofia como um “retratista”: um olhar brentaniano sobre o debate Contextualismo-Apropriaçãoismo ***

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Abstract: In 2019, Christia Mercer has published a paper in which she does a reassessment of the 2015 debate between Garber and Della Rocca on what would be the correct interpretation of Spinoza. Following Mercer, the two philosophers instantiated two main positions regarding the concept and the methodology of doing history of philosophy, namely, contextualism and appropriationism. As Mercer puts it, it is pivoted around the acceptance or rejection of one single principle, i.e. the “Getting Things Right Constraint” (GTRC), which can be rendered as the clause that forbids the attribution of claims or ideas to historical figures without concern for whether or not they are ones the figures would recognize as their own. However, rather than be an undoubtful principle, it conceals a great number of tough questions about the very meaning of what one should understand by “getting things right”. Following what Mulligan names the “Austrian approach” to the history of philosophy, this paper aims to unfold some aspects of Brentano’s “philosophy of history of philosophy” to look for his contributions to a problem that was already present at the origins of contemporary philosophy.

Keywords: Brentano. Contextualism. Appropriationism. History of Philosophy.

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Resumo: Em 2019, Christia Mercer publicou um artigo no qual faz uma reavaliação do debate de 2015 entre Garber e Della Rocca sobre qual seria a interpretação correta de Spinoza. Seguindo Mercer, os dois filósofos instanciaram duas posições principais em relação ao conceito e à metodologia da história da filosofia, a saber, o contextualismo e o apropriação. Como diz Mercer, tal debate orbita em torno da aceitação ou rejeição de um único princípio, ou seja, o “Getting Things Right Constraint” (GTRC), que pode ser interpretado como a cláusula que proíbe a atribuição de reivindicações ou ideias a figuras históricas sem a preocupação de que tais figuras as reconheceriam como suas. Porém, o GTRC está longe de ser um princípio indubitável e esconde um grande número de questões difíceis sobre o próprio significado do que se deve entender por “compreender as coisas corretamente”. Seguindo o que Mulligan chama de “abordagem austríaca” da história da filosofia, este artigo pretende desdobrar alguns aspectos da “filosofia da história da filosofia” de Brentano para buscar suas contribuições para um problema que já estava presente nas origens da filosofia contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Brentano. Contextualismo. Apropriação. História da Filosofia.

Introduction

In the very first paragraph of his *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, R. G. Collingwood makes a very interesting statement:

There are some things which we can do without understanding what we are doing; not only things which we do with our bodies, like locomotion and digestion, but even things which we do with our minds, like making a poem or recognizing a face. But when that which we do is in the nature of thinking, it begins to be desirable, if we are to do it well, that we should understand what we are trying to do. Scientific and historical thought could never go very far unless scientists and historians reflected on their own work, tried to understand what they were aiming at, and asked themselves how best to attain it. Most of all, this is true of philosophy. It is possible to raise and solve philosophical problems with no very clear idea of what philosophy is, what it is trying to do, and how it can best do it; but no great progress can be made until these questions have been asked and some answer to them given.¹

In fact, the set of problems of which philosophy is made includes questions not only about specific themes and topics but has to cope with the famous worries about the very nature of philosophy and how it should be done. Because reasoning is, at the same time, the main philosophical tool as well as its object, philosophers –at least from Parmenides on– always had to deal with those two questions. However, the history of the problem “how

¹ COLLINGWOOD, *An essay on philosophical method*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005, p. 1.

one should do philosophy?" shows that the answer is not straightforward at all. It has many comes and goes, multiple layers, and side problems. But at least since Aristotle, one of its main aspects is the relations between the problem analysis in its multiple aspects and the history made out of it. In *Metaphysics*, when Aristotle puts forward what can be seen as a part of his metaphysical views on how to solve a philosophical problem is like untying a knot and, thus, "it is not possible to untie a knot which one does not know"², he adds that

It is just that we should be grateful, not only to those whose opinions we may share but also to those who have expressed more superficial views; for these also contributed something, by developing before us the powers of thought. It is true that if there had been no Timotheus we should have been without much of our lyric poetry, but if there had been no Phrynus there would have been no Timotheus. The same holds good for those who have expressed views about the truth; for from the better thinkers we have inherited certain opinions, while the others have been responsible for the appearance of the better thinkers.³

Well, the relationship between philosophical analysis of problems and their history is, therefore, almost as old as philosophy itself. However, more recently in such a history, we have two straightly connected moments in which the question of the best way to approach that relationship came to surface in a special form, namely, the 19th century and its legacy, the contemporary philosophy.

Good evidence of how such a question is still very relevant nowadays can be seen in a recent paper by Christia Mercer (Columbia), published in 2019 in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (vol. 57, n. 3, 529-548), as well as in the reactions to it⁴. Through the debate between Daniel Garber⁵ and Michael Della Rocca⁶ in the same journal about what would be the better approach to Spinoza, Mercer brings back the argument between Contextualism versus Appropriationism regarding the history of philosophy and argues that "While no one was looking, contextualism replaced rational reconstructionism (also known as 'appropriationism,' 'presentism,' and 'collegialism') as the dominant methodology among English-speaking early modern historians of philosophy"⁷.

² ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* in BARNES, J. (ed.) Aristotle — Complete Works, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 1991, 995a.

³ *Ibidem*, 993b.

⁴ See, for instance, Eric Schliesser (2019) and Martin Lenz (2019) online articles on it.

⁵ GARBER, D. "Superheroes in the History of Philosophy: Spinoza, Super-Rationalist." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 53 no. 3, 2015a, p. 507-521 and "Some Additional (But Not Final) Words." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 53 no. 3, 2015b, p. 537-539.

⁶ DELLA ROCCA, M. "Interpreting Spinoza: The Real is the Rational." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 53 no. 3, 2015, p. 523-535.

⁷ MERCER, C. "The Contextualist Revolution in Early Modern Philosophy", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (vol. 57, n. 3, p. 529-548), 2019, p. 529.

Despite departing from a quarrel on the history of early modern philosophy, Mercer's goal is to offer some thoughts on the broader methodological and metaphilosophical question of how to cope with thinkers from the past (and giving her own analysis on it, namely, that contextualism subtly won the fight). As pointed out above, since the paper was published, some philosophers have been writing comments and criticisms on it, based on several different backgrounds. Thus, my main objective here is to look at the Contextualism X Appropriationism debate from a different standpoint than has been done currently. And for different reasons too.

Firstly, even though the questions on how to do philosophy and what should be the relation to its own history are, as I said above, really old, they got a renewed interest during the second half of the 19th century, the cradle of Contemporary philosophy. Afflicted by the turmoil caused by multiple factors during the last decades of that century, philosophy had to rethink itself, its nature, its place in the whole building of knowledge, and, consequently, its methods⁸. Hence, the current debates and the related positions in it, as well as the development of it during the whole 20th century are better understood if one looks at it from its 19th-century roots. And –advancing some conclusions somehow– not only because that is the historical path, but in going back to that period we can see some relevant aspects and contributions that we may have left behind. One philosopher in particular, Franz Brentano (1838-1917), devoted several talks and writings to that spectrum of problems and we can draw some good insights from them. Thus, firstly I am going to expose the Garber *versus* Della Rocca debate, as well as Mercer's approach to it, and, then, with such panorama in mind, we can get back to Brentano's possible contributions from his philosophy of history of philosophy.

1. The Contextualism X Appropriationism Debate: Garber, Della Rocca, and Mercer

As is widely known, a not neglectable part of contemporary philosophy, during the 20th century and even nowadays, has an uneasy relation to the history of philosophy. It is not necessary to deeply investigate such a phenomenon here; suffice it to say that the recent interest in the history of philosophy by the dominant party of today's scholars – i.e. analytic philosophers – became something remarkable and was the main object of analysis of several books and papers and motivated even the idea of a “historical turn” within analytic philosophy⁹. Notwithstanding, such

⁸ See SCHNÄDELBACH, H. *Philosophie in Deutschland – 1831-1933*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983; FREULER, L. *La crise de la philosophie au XIXe siècle*, Paris: Vrin, 1997.

⁹ See RECK, E. “Introduction: Analytical Philosophy and Philosophical History” in RECK, E. (ed.) *The Historical Turn in Analytic Philosophy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 1-38.

a move or inclination towards a more friendly relation to the history of philosophy was the occasion to arise –or to, actually, bring back to the surface– some unsolved conflicts. That is why every philosopher who made any sort of incursion into the history of philosophy but did not want to see himself fully identified with the task of a historian, felt the obligation to write couple lines on it.

But the so-called clash between “philosophical analysis” and “history of philosophy” was only apparently solved or dismissed. It was translated or, one could say, the clash made its reappearance in the realm of methodological discussions about the “pure” history of philosophy. In other words, even in a context where the relevance and importance of the history of philosophy are not under attack, namely, for proudly self-declared “historians of philosophy”, the problem of how to cope with past thinkers and their ideas still bothers. Well, *et in arcadia ego*¹⁰.

Using the terms that now seem to be common to both sides, the problem can be rendered as the debate between Contextualism and Appropriationism. Some philosophers understand that the study of the history of philosophy is a task that must and shall be done for its own sake. For them, the understanding of philosophers from the past is worthy by itself and it is not dependent on current worries and trends. As they see it, the understanding of ideas and thoughts from the past has its tools and methods, more or less, closer to pure historiography, since the network of elements that enable us to get what the philosophers from the past actually thought must be drawn for what we could dub as the “context”. On the other corner, we have philosophers that, despite the plain acknowledgment of the importance of the history of philosophy, such a worth comes from a different source. Instead of trying to exhume past ideas and bring them to the surface, those philosophers see the history of philosophy as a repository, a virtual storehouse of resources for our current philosophical worries and problems. As they see it, our interest about philosophers from the past is not independent of our philosophical present, but it is precisely the other way round; they are there to be *appropriated* having in mind what concerns us presently. Of course, representatives of the first way are the *contextualists* and, of the second, *appropriationists*¹¹.

¹⁰ In the introduction of the excellent volume on the history of early modern philosophy, Lærke, Smith and Schliesser introduce both positions by saying that “Almost all philosophers agree that one cannot be properly trained in current philosophy without knowing something of either the historical development of the discipline or without some familiarity with the writings of certain canonical figures” (LÆRKE, M; SMITH, J. E. H.; SCHLIESSER, E. (eds.) *Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods in The Study of Early Modern Philosophy*, New York: OUP, 2013, p. 1). However, the problems are still there.

¹¹ One can find some other terms for each group in the growing literature about it: instead of “appropriationism”, “rational reconstruction”, “presentism”, and “collegialism”.

Of course, it would be very easy if we could stand at the extremes. The debate between contextualists and appropriationists would have no degrees or shades of gray and the evaluation of the pros and cons of both positions would be far easier to do. But when it comes to real people and their actual visions about it, things get harder. In a 2019 paper published in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Christia Mercer, among other things, brings the topic to the surface once again, going back to the debate between Daniel Garber and Michael Della Rocca, in the same journal, in 2015. In that volume of *Journal of History of Philosophy*, Garber and Della Rocca, among other papers, exchanged a couple of articles that, initially, were on the interpretation of Spinoza, but quickly became parts of a discussion on metaphilosophical views on how to cope with philosophers from the past. Leaving aside Mercer's approach for a moment, it can be useful to retrieve some points of that debate.

Everything started with Garber's first text¹², which is a reading of Della Rocca's book on Spinoza, in which Della Rocca is said to center his interpretation upon the centrality of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). The main point of Garber's criticism on Della Rocca's work is that "the appeal to the PSR is more a rational reconstruction than a direct reading"¹³ and, therefore, "as attractive as such a view of Spinoza may be, it is not the historical Spinoza who lived and worked in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic"¹⁴. Garber keeps giving examples of what one can see as a typical move made by "appropriationists". After quoting a passage by Della Rocca in which he states that, for Spinoza, all mental states must be representational, Garber stresses that

Again, this is not an argument that Spinoza himself gives, but that Della Rocca gives in his name. He writes, "It must be acknowledged that the lines of reasoning I have just articulated are not to be found on the surface of Spinoza's texts; yet I think that they are not far below the surface" (122). This is the project, to mine below the surface in Spinoza's text, and find out what, in a way, is the real motivation behind the words on the surface.¹⁵

And finishes his review by saying that

While Della Rocca and I certainly have a number of substantive differences about how to read Spinoza's philosophy, probably deeper are the methodological differences about what one is doing when doing the history of philosophy.

I strongly suspect that Della Rocca knows perfectly well that what he is concerned with in his book *Spinoza* is not exactly the historical Spinoza,

¹² GARBER, "Superheroes in the History of Philosophy: Spinoza, Super-Rationalist.", p. 507-521.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 515.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 510.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 510-511.

but a kind of rational reconstruction of Spinoza's project. [...] It is Spinoza shorn of the historical contingencies, Spinoza purified, the interesting philosophical program that underlies what the perhaps imperfectly rational (and imperfectly rationalist) Spinoza actually wrote.¹⁶

The "methodological differences" that are at stake in Garber's comments on Della Rocca's book can be summed up, I think, in two clauses:

1. The consideration of a philosopher's historical context (or "contingencies") is a necessary condition in order to reach the "real" thought of a philosopher;
2. The evaluation of what a philosopher (from the past) actually thought depends on what he "actually wrote" or, in other words, what is "in" his texts which is the warranty of "directedness".

In the same issue of *JHP*, Della Rocca replies to Garber's comments making explicit that "Garber's aim in his essay is to challenge my reading of Spinoza both on first-order interpretive grounds and on second-order methodological grounds"¹⁷. Della Rocca then proceeds to the first part of his argumentation showing that his interpretation has a textual basis in Spinoza's work. So far, so good. But things get more interesting when it comes to the tangential point of those two dimensions. Della Rocca contests the first aspect of Garber's critique, namely, what the latter sees as the opposition between the "direct reading" and the "rational reconstruction", whose consequence is the difference between getting the "real historical" Spinoza, rather than "an ideal type, a superhero but not the actual philosopher"¹⁸. Della Rocca pinpoints the main argument against any type of appropriationism, namely, the idea that such an approach does not reach or grab the "real" thought of a given philosopher, which can be said as the "actually" or "historically" correct outlook of him.

Why does Garber call my reading less than direct? Perhaps it is because, as Garber rightly notes, I rely on and attribute to Spinoza lines of thought that are not explicit in the text. Thus, I engage in what Garber calls "rational reconstructions." It will not surprise anyone to hear that I do not regard rational reconstruction as inherently problematic. Where I disagree with Garber is in his characterization of my reading as less direct.¹⁹

If we move back to Mercer's paper, whose main thesis consists in showing how the contextualist approach overcame the appropriationist one in the last years, we can find a variation of Garber's argument. Mercer's version of the methodological difference between Garber and Della Rocca is pre-

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 520.

¹⁷ DELLA ROCCA, "Interpreting Spinoza: The Real is the Rational.", p. 523-535.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 523-524.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 530.

sented by Mercer as a matter of acceptance or rejection of a principle she names as “Getting Things Right Constraint” (GTRC):

As a first approximation, I render the GTRC as follows: historians of philosophy should not attribute claims or ideas to historical figures without concern for whether or not they are ones the figures would recognize as their own. When philosophers reject the GTRC, they do things like the following: they interpret historical materials with the sole intention of making them relevant to contemporary philosophy; they pluck claims or ideas from texts without concern for their textual or contextual circumstance; or they approach writings without intending to articulate the authentic views of the historical figure.²⁰

As Mercer herself admits²¹, the GTRC is partially built upon Quentin Skinner’s constraint, which is also mentioned by Rorty in his classic text on “four genres”²². In his “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, Skinner states that “[...]no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done”²³. In fact, Skinner’s principle is usually used as one of the main trumps against appropriationism, since they, in doing, as Rorty says, rational reconstructions usually mine the history looking for “philosophical truths”, rather than “historical reconstructions” and, in doing that, “are frequently accused of beating texts into the shape of propositions currently being debated in the philosophical journals”²⁴. It is such a point, therefore, that lies under the two main charges against rational reconstructionists: the accusation of anachronism, and distortion. However, it is interesting to notice that was rational reconstructionism that, to some extent, helped the rehabilitation or the reassessment of the history of philosophy within analytic philosophy²⁵.

In fact, the very “parting of ways”²⁶ between analytic and continental philosophy has some of its roots in the “philosophy’s crisis” in the 19th

²⁰ MERCER, “The Contextualist Revolution in Early Modern Philosophy”, p. 530.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 535, f. 21.

²² RORTY, R. “The historiography of philosophy: four genres” in RORTY, R.; SCHNEEWIND, J.; SKINNER, Q. (eds.), *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1984, p. 49-76.

²³ SKINNER, Q. “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1969, p. 28. As the text follows, Skinner himself acknowledges the possibility that an external observer may be “in a position to give a fuller or more convincing account” (p. 29) of the other’s thought. However, such a better account cannot be built or made upon elements not available to the interpreted author.

²⁴ RORTY, “The historiography of philosophy: four genres”, p. 49.

²⁵ BEANEY, M. “Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy: The Development of the Idea of Rational Reconstruction” in RECK, E. (ed.) *The Historical Turn in Analytic Philosophy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 231-260.

²⁶ See FRIEDMAN, M. *A parting of ways – Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger*, Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2000.

century²⁷ that had, as one of its distinctive marks the quarrel regarding the philosophical method and, by consequence, the relations between philosophy and its own history. That is why we can find, from Hegel to Windelband, a good amount of philosophers particularly sensitive about the problem of how philosophy can remain relevant as a field of knowledge without having to abandon its specific features, as its special relationship with its history and its past.

It is in such a context that the Austrian philosopher Franz Brentano engaged in such debates and presented some good thoughts I think must contribute or, at least, cast some light on the current debate Appropriationism X Contextualism²⁸.

2 Brentano's philosophy of history of philosophy

If looked at superficially and taken in an atomic, disconnected way, Brentano's statements on, and relations to, the history of philosophy can be deceptive. On the one hand, Brentano himself can be seen as a major contributor to Aristotelian studies in the 19th century. In such a way, his texts on philosophers from the past are as interesting as sharp. His comments on Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Hegel, but also on Malebranche, Leibniz, and Pascal, are good pieces of philosophical criticism and analysis²⁹. One of his most famous ideas, the four phases theory, is also related to the history of philosophy³⁰. On the other hand, his programmatic views about philosophy and its method are equally well-known and could lead us in another way. From the first thesis of his habilitation, which challenges the very distinction between exact and speculative sciences, to the celebrated fourth thesis which states that the true method of philosophy is one and the same as the natural sciences³¹, Brentano's view on the methodological exceptionalism of philosophy, as well as his judgment on the relevance of the study of its history could seem to be not so positive.

²⁷ See SCHNÄDELBACH, H. *Philosophie in Deutschland – 1831-1933*; FREULER, L. *La crise de la philosophie au XIXe siècle*; BEISER, F. C. *After Hegel – German Philosophy 1840-1900*, Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014.

²⁸ As one can see, the appeal to a philosopher from the 19th century I am doing here is, itself, an instance of the Brentanian approach as I will show in the next section.

²⁹ BRENTANO, F. *Philosophie der Geschichte der Philosophie* in BRENTANO, F. *Philosophie der Neuzeit*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1987, pp. 77-80. I would like to thank Prof. Guillaume Fréchette for granting me access to this volume.

³⁰ BRENTANO, F. "Les quatre phases de la philosophie et son état actuel" in BRENTANO, F. *Essays et conférences – I: Sur l'histoire de la philosophie*, Paris: Vrin, 2018c, p. 141-166.

³¹ BRENTANO, F. "La philosophie de Schelling" in BRENTANO, F. *Essays et conférences – I: Sur l'histoire de la philosophie*, Paris: Vrin, 2018b, p. 45-48.

However, such apparent contradictions, far from being proof of Brentano's not so well reflected standpoint on the matter, display a way more sophisticated view that can even help us to think about the current debate between appropriationists and contextualists.

In a conference in the first meeting of the philosophical society of the University of Vienna in 1888, entitled "On the method of the historical research in the domain of philosophy", Brentano begins by stating a criticism that seems to be the bottom line of his view on the relations between philosophy and its history:

What mathematician, what physicist, chemist, or researcher in sciences would be willing to admit that his field had or has been transformed in the history of sciences? On the contrary! [...] Identifying [*identifizieren*] philosophy with the history of philosophy is simply to engage in a bad step in philosophy and to lose confidence in its true progress.³²

Firstly, that relation is clarified when we compare it with the relation between the natural sciences and their histories. The identification of the philosophical activity and its history is as absurd as the identification of physical or chemical research and their histories. Hence, if there is no space for philosophical exceptionalism regarding the method, there is no space for exceptionalism concerning its history either. In effect, Brentano points out, a few lines later, that history of philosophy can even be a sort of fetish for philosophers that exaggerate its importance. It is also remarkable that one of the side effects –or would it be one of the causes?– of that identification is the lack of trust in the very possibility of progress in philosophy. What Brentano seems to have in mind is that whoever engages in doing pure historiographic research on philosophy looks only to the past for its own sake and would leave aside or put into brackets current challenges and questions and, in doing so, the philosophical present becomes deflated.

However, such a standpoint that Brentano sees as an excess of importance given to the history of philosophy, must find an Aristotelian golden mean. We cannot fall prey to the other extreme where "others put it (history of philosophy) excessively down"³³. Therefore, Brentano also rejects any sort of absolute disdain for the history of philosophy rooted in what he calls "pessimism" over the past, for not recognizing the achievements of those who preceded us.

Once again, Brentano seems to leave us in a not-so-promising position. As even Mercer points out in the above-mentioned paper, extreme positions must be abandoned, and, moreover, at least two questions can be fairly addressed to Brentano so far: firstly, once we avoid the extremes, how

³² BRENTANO, F. "La méthode de la recherche historique dans le domaine de la philosophie" in BRENTANO, F. *Essays et conférences – I: Sur l'histoire de la philosophie*, Paris: Vrin, 2018a, p. 129-140, p. 129-130.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

should we approach the history of philosophy? And secondly, what is or are the criteria to find that golden mean?

The first component of the answers for both questions is having in mind the difference between the periods or phases, as Brentano saw them. As the Austrian philosopher presents in a more detailed fashion in an 1894 talk, since the history of philosophy is the history of scientific efforts³⁴, it would be possible to find regularities throughout it. Hence, according to him, the three moments of the history of philosophy –ancient, medieval, and modern– should exhibit themselves a similar internal structure. It is not the occasion to go deeper into the four phases thesis but suffice it to remember that each historical moment has four asymmetrical phases, namely, one of ascent or rise, and three of decline or decay³⁵. Thus, going back to Brentano’s talk on the method of historical research, that is why he affirms that those who reject history of philosophy can have a partial reason to do so because there are some periods that “do not offer practically nothing we can presently take as our own”³⁶. Therefore, “if the history of philosophy shall be practiced in a way that it will truly make a contribution to the progress of philosophy, then it must take into consideration that difference between the periods”³⁷.

As it seems, Brentano presupposes his four phases approach or, at least, he advises that the historian of philosophy keep in mind that some periods are more fruitful than others and, moved perhaps by a positivistic point of view, that his job must offer contributions to the current philosophical *status quaestionis*. Otherwise, they can arouse only a “pathological interest”³⁸. In this sense, the history of philosophy is, to some extent, a source for elements –arguments, hypotheses, points of view, etc.– that can help us somehow to cope with our own contemporary questions having in mind a presumed advancement of philosophy. Such a view suggests that the historian of philosophy must look to the past bearing in mind that asymmetrical philosophical importance between the moments and, then, make choices here and there.

That sort of philosophical selection is put forward also through a very interesting analogy from which Brentano derives another principle that shall guide the research in the history of philosophy:

A historian is like a painter, but not like a painter who freely composes because this type resembles a novelist. The historian looks more like a

³⁴ BRENTANO, “Les quatre phases de la philosophie et son état actuel”, p. 144.

³⁵ It is interesting to notice that, to differentiate the ascent phase and the descent phases, Brentano points out the distinct emphasis on theoretical and practical reason, saying that the ascent phases stressed the former, while the others stressed the latter. Compare to Russell’s analysis in *On scientific method in philosophy* (1914).

³⁶ BRENTANO, “Les quatre phases de la philosophie et son état actuel”, p. 130.

³⁷ BRENTANO, “La méthode de la recherche historique dans le domaine de la philosophie”, p. 131.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

portraitist (*Portraitmaler*) who, in an essentially different manner from that of the photographer, knows how to make abstraction from the accessorial and brings the essential to the light. General complaints about the historical micrology. Such a mistake is also perpetrated in the domain of the history of philosophy. One can find several remarks totally devoid of philosophical interest in the work by Zeller, *The philosophy of the Greeks* [...] With a few noteworthy lines he would give us the same things, if not more. [...] Only the historical fact which is relevant from the philosophical point of view belongs to a history of philosophy. In order to recognize it, one needs a philosophical sense (*Sinn*) which most parts of those who nowadays engage themselves in the history of philosophy seem to lack. And one can see already here what we will show more clearly later once again, namely, that only the philosopher is capable of cultivating the history of philosophy in a fruitful way.³⁹

The excerpt seems to have the core of Brentano's view about the task of the historian of philosophy, as well as its object. Firstly, according to his analogy, the historian is someone who, like a painter, shall display something, but not in a creative way, getting the themes, objects, and relations from his own imagination, but rather, takes his material from the past. However, such a work of displaying shall not be a mere reproduction of the raw data taken from older times either, like a photographer would do, as Brentano sees him, but it must be done through a selection. It means that not everything must be part of what the historian will display, but also that making choices is part of his task. Brentano states that the historian must be like a portraitist (*Portraitmaler*) in selecting what should be in the picture and what should not and, therefore, the historian of philosophy is someone who assembles the image, putting together separate components and leaving aside some others in order to create a good picture. Hence, the process of selection and assembling turns the task of the historian into a task of a constructor, or better, of a re-creator that explores the raw data from the past to make a meaningful picture. Of course, the act of choosing that Brentano ascribes to the historian brings us to the question of the criteria for that selection. Well, once again, Brentano reasserts that the criteria to be satisfied for something counting as a relevant element of an account of the past is its philosophical value which, in a more explicit form could be complemented by saying "its philosophical value for us", or "having in mind the current concerns".

It is the same process of picking elements and arranging (or rearranging) them to infer something that Brentano presents once again, now citing the example of Kepler. Briefly presenting his position against Zeller in the debate on creationism⁴⁰, Brentano uses it as an instance of how it is

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 132.

⁴⁰ Chisholm (BRENTANO, *Aristotle and His World View*, p. xviii-ix) offers a summary of Brentano's position.

possible when facing fragmentary texts or lack of conclusions, one can infer propositions not explicitly stated by the author. The procedure to do so is “to take into account the doctrine in its wholeness” and to notice that “it makes possible the correct understanding of an equivocal statement [since] it serves to fill the gaps of doctrines that come to us in a fragmentary form”⁴¹. Like Kepler, “who, departing from some observations of Mars [...] could construct (*konstruiert*) its complete orbit and could discover the law that governs the orbits of the planets”⁴². However, the point that interests us here is not Brentano presenting his interpretative toolbox but rather his affirmation that it serves even to draw some conclusions that were not explicitly stated by the object texts. It is Brentano himself that highlights such a move:

[...] it is possible, then, with the help of a plurality of alignments, to bring to the light a fundamental thought that was not handed down! In my work *On the several senses of being in Aristotle*, I have succeeded in finding the deduction of his table of categories which was frequently presupposed, but that was not preserved anywhere.⁴³

The same procedure appears in the “concluding remarks” of *Aristotle and his worldview*. Anticipating possible criticism, Brentano says:

It is indeed true that this view is not set forth in Aristotle’s writing as explicitly as I have described and defended it here, for Aristotle, unfortunately, did not find time to write the intended detailed exposition of his metaphysics. Must I, therefore, fear the reproach that I did to Aristotle what Plato did to Socrates, namely, put much in his mouth that was not in his mind? Perhaps this objection will be raised. But I flatter myself that anyone will correct his judgment in my favor if he pays careful attention to the consequences of the principles, and to what comes to light in scattered but highly significant remarks and if he also takes a look at the remarkable Problems of Theophrastus.⁴⁴

The objection Brentano was afraid of is precisely what appropriationists also have to face nowadays. And he anticipates both “Skinner’s constraint” and the usual appropriationist answer. As it seems, for Brentano, if someone points to Skinner’s constraint and affirms that a given position is not explicitly stated by the philosopher from the past, one could appeal to reason and show that such a conclusion (logically) follows from the (accepted) principles⁴⁵. However, Brentano uses an unusual (for appropria-

⁴¹ BRENTANO, “La méthode de la recherche historique dans le domaine de la philosophie”, p. 134.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 134.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

⁴⁴ BRENTANO, *Aristotle and His World View*, p. 124.

⁴⁵ Compare this to the *De Re* inference that Brandom presents in *Tales of the Might Dead – Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Cambridge: OUP, 2002.

tionists) and very interesting argument in his defense. He refers to the fact that his conclusions are similar to those by Theophrastus. He is alluding to a contemporary of Aristotle and, in fact, his successor at the Lyceum, as a historical-philosophical authority that confirms, in a very *contextualist* fashion, one could say, his own interpretation. It is truly credible to think that Brentano had in mind the two dimensions of such an argument, both his philosophical force, but also the historical one, and the closeness between Theophrastus and Aristotle also counts in favor of his correctness.

Now we seem to be in a good position to explicitly make the question: Having in mind the classification above, was Brentano an appropriationist? Kevin Mulligan, in a great paper on the history of the analytic approach to the history of philosophy, in which he traces back that approach to what he names as the “Austrian approach”, states explicitly that what Rorty calls “rational reconstruction” –the evaluation of such and such contribution to this or that given problem– is precisely what lays at the center of the Austrian approach to the history of philosophy⁴⁶. Notwithstanding, if on the one hand, every quotation presented above seems to lead us to a sharp positive answer, the mention of Theophrastus and the interpretation I gave to it could be a *sed contra*?

Let me add another one. In 1883, during his long-lasting debate with Zeller on Aristotle’s creantism, Brentano wrote an open letter to his opponent accusing him, once again, of misinterpretation of Aristotle’s psychology and metaphysics. One could say, already here, that the very argument about an interpretative matter of a philosopher from the past is a sign of Brentano’s goodwill regarding the goal of “getting things right”. But one of his statements in that letter is even more telling. In pointing out Zeller’s mistakes, Brentano concludes that, after all, “The Aristotle from your *Philosophy of the Greeks* has nothing to do with the *historical* Aristotle. [...] It would be necessary to give back to Aristotle the honor he has, and I could not do it unless I turn, in a critical way, to your *distortions*”⁴⁷.

It seems that Brentano, by accusing Zeller that his view of Aristotle does not match with the *historical* philosopher due to *distortions* in his interpretations, had in mind an idea of how a good and right historical depiction of Aristotle would be. However, if we keep in mind what I’ve been saying

⁴⁶ See MULLIGAN, “Sur L’Histoire de L’Approche Analytique de L’Histoire de la Philosophie: De Bolzano Et Brentano À Benett Et Barnes” in J.-M. Vienne (ed.), *Philosophie analytique et Histoire de la philosophie*, Paris: Vrin, 1997, p. 90.

⁴⁷ BRENTANO, F. “Lettre ouverte à Monsieur le Professeur Eduard Zeller. À l’occasion de son texte sur la doctrine aristotélicienne de l’éternité de l’esprit” in BRENTANO, F. *Essays et conférences – I: Sur l’histoire de la philosophie*, Paris: Vrin, 2018, p. 397. Italics are mine. A similar accusation is directed toward Schelling in BRENTANO, F. “La philosophie de Schelling” in BRENTANO, F. *Essays et conférences – I: Sur l’histoire de la philosophie*, Paris: Vrin, 2018.

above, the true and correct description of a philosopher from the past does not contain only what “contextualists” would happily admit, but also what are the “(logical) consequences of (one’s) principles”. It is not a matter of, as Mercer puts it, recognizing the “increasing evident and innovative” “advantages of non-appropriationist approach”. The “portraist” task of the historian of philosophy means a continuous movement of changing the focus on the front and back, selecting objects and elements from both dimensions in order in a dialectic manner to avoid distortions. Therefore, the very question about taking sides, choosing contextualism and appropriationism, seems to make no sense in Brentano’s rendition of the task of a historian of philosophy.

Some final remarks

Putting everything together, I would like to advance some final remarks.

- a) GTRC and Skinner’s criteria are easily formulated, but not so easily understood and satisfied. What should we understand for the “author’s acceptance” criteria? Would one accept only what is explicitly written or, as Brentano says, what follows from one’s principles? Moreover, GTRC understood via Skinner’s principle seems to presuppose what is the actual difficulty. In order to know if a given interpretation of a past philosopher is correct or, at least, tenable, one must already know what the past philosopher thinks to be able to compare both⁴⁸;
- b) As Eric Schliesser points out⁴⁹, interpreting the past revolves around what a person –in this case, the author– would recognize as his own positions and ideas leaving aside the fact that, on many occasions, people have biases they fail to recognize and unexpressed assumed presuppositions. For instance, it is not unusual to see, in the history of philosophy, philosophers who are exchanging letters with friends or students discussing a problem whose terms are not expressed or written down precisely because they are presupposed. It is also not unusual that diaries, notes, letters, etc. have only fragments of ideas or philosophical commitments. Hence, it can be the case that either one abandoned those ideas with no reason, or because,

⁴⁸ See VERMEIR, K. “Philosophy and Genealogy: Ways of Writing History of Philosophy” in LÆRKE, M; SMITH, J. E. H.; SCHLIESSER, E. (eds.) *Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods in The Study of Early Modern Philosophy*, New York: OUP, 2013, p. 51.

⁴⁹ See SCHLIESSER, E. “On Getting Things Right (Constraints) in the History of Philosophy”, available at <https://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2019/07/on-getting-things-right-constraints-in-the-history-of-philosophy.html>, 2019.

as Brentano says about Aristotle, “did not have time” to continue, or even because he noticed a mistake or a contradiction in them. Considering the last possibility, it is a great philosophical advancement in terms of interpreting a thinker from the past to analyze if his unfinished thoughts would be untenable or would clash or conflict with some of his recognized or expressed principles. In such a case, “getting the things right” means precisely to express what one probably wouldn’t accept as his or, if accepted, that it would be an inconsistency;

- c) If GTRC is to be understood in terms of Skinner’s principle, it misses a very important part of what makes the history of philosophy philosophically relevant for every and each generation. It would be absolutely bizarre to think that, in writing a philosophical text, philosophers are writing only for their living peers and that their arguments, statements, and proposed solutions have a “shelf life” that happens to be the same as their lives span. As Martin Lenz insightfully states, such a view “ignores the fact that philosophers and other authors often write for future generations. Descartes, Spinoza, but also Kant, Nietzsche, and others were clearly writing decidedly for future audiences. To explain their texts only by reference to their time impoverishes the philosophical potential”⁵⁰.
- d) In putting forward constraints like the “Getting Things Right” or Skinner’s, contextualists usually want to indicate that appropriationists are trying to somehow recreate the past. However, from the point of view of pure historiography, such an accusation is hardly tenable, especially because, in presenting such a charge, the contextualists seem to forget that he is recreating the past too. The difference here is, of course, on what they rely on in order to undertake their enterprise. Contextualists derive their outcomes from a previously set of historical and hermeneutical categories they accept as tools and share with other contextualists as acceptable ones. From a formal point of view, appropriationists do exactly the same, being different only when it comes to the content of that set of hermeneutical categories. And there are many ways and many elements to fill up that set with.
- e) However, contextualists have a point that any sort of appropriationist must have in mind. Philosophical problems and problems with philosophical answers are essentially historical in two dimensions, namely, they emerge from a web of relations, interests, and perspectives that are historically influenced, but also can only be understood historically. It is impossible to properly understand Hegel’s

⁵⁰ LENZ, M. “Did Descartes read Wittgenstein? – Towards a Conceptual Geography”, *Magyar Filozófiai Szemle*, vol. 2022/1, p. 13.

problems without a previous understanding of Kant. And that is not only because Hegel lived after Kant, but because the inherited *status quaestionis* was built upon Kant's thought. Notwithstanding, it is not necessary to see rational and historical reconstructions as doing opposite jobs. Making explicit how philosophers from the past can be philosophically relevant today is also a way of getting their thoughts right. Hence, I can see no reason for identifying Rational Reconstruction and Appropriationism *stricto sensu* as Mercer does (2019, p. 530). Of course, a deeper engagement with her thesis would demand another paper, but I think it is a defensible position to say that the GTRC principle can include what (logically) follows from a statement; in other words, understanding what a philosopher says can include its inferential consistency, even though such inferences were not fully explicit⁵¹;

- f) Fallacy of pre-established hermeneutical harmony: the ideal text is not only the actual written text, but it is made with the text and parts of others with which it dialogues, as well as its contextual elements, and its unity is not artificial or *a posteriori*, but makes an inseparable unicity. However, if a contextualist accepts such a view, she must accept a great dose of a rational reconstruction as well, broadly understood as the use of a set of presuppositions and inferences that comes from the interpreter⁵².
- g) Hence, having the previous discussions in mind, Brentano's thoughts on what he calls "philosophy of history of philosophy" seems to offer some good hints on how to reach the "golden mean" between Appropriationism and Contextualism. The image of the *Portraitmaler* as the paradigm of a proficuous approach to philosophers from the past combines both one eye to the interpreter's current philosophical questions and another eye to the a (historically) "correct" rendition of the philosopher's ideas. But what is particularly noteworthy is that what the term "correction" means cannot be achieved by extruding the whole universe of ideas, premises, and logical consequences of one's set of thoughts. For Brentano, the mere reproduction or paraphrasis of the (explicitly registered) data isn't enough if one wants to have a trustworthy view of a (historically determined) philosopher's ideas. Along the lines of what Beaney would present as a "dialectical reconstruction"⁵³ almost one century later, Brenta-

⁵¹ See BRANDOM, R. *Tales of the Might Dead – Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, p. 90-120 and BEANEY, M. *Frege: Making Sense*, London: Duckworth, 1996, p. 12-16.

⁵² On the fallacy of pre-established hermeneutical harmony see PORTA, M. "Filosofia e história da filosofia: uma reflexão sobre as relações de texto e contexto". *Cognitio-Estudos*, vol. 8, no. 2, julho-dezembro, 2011, p. 141-148.

⁵³ See BEANEY, M. *Frege: Making Sense*, p. 3ff. and BEANEY, M. "Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy: The Development of the Idea of Rational Reconstruction" in RECK, E. (ed.) *The Historical Turn in Analytic Philosophy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 253ff.

no is affirming that no expectancy of “correction” in interpreting a philosopher can be held unless we combine that both sets of elements. Hence, from a Brentanian standpoint, Mercer’s verdict that “philosophical advantages of a non-appropriationist approach became increasingly evident”⁵⁴ cannot describe a correct historical description of the current situation mainly because the “philosophical advantages of a non-appropriationist approach” are far from being “evident” unless we identify “appropriationism”, understood in a very restrictive and absolutely not-historically informed way, and rational reconstruction. If Brentano’s approach tells us something is that a form of coping with philosophers from the past not only can but must be well balanced between those two poles.

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⁵⁴ MERCER, “The Contextualist Revolution in Early Modern Philosophy”, p. 545.

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