A Logical–Contextual History of Philosophy

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Abstract: Many philosophers affiliated with the analytic school contend that the history of philosophy is not relevant to their work. The present study challenges this claim by introducing a strong variant of the philosophical history of philosophy termed the "logical–contextual history of philosophy." Its objective is to map the "logical geography" of the concepts and theories of past philosophical masters, concepts and theories that are not only genealogically, but also logically related. Such history of philosophy cannot be set in opposition to the traditional "systematic philosophy." Rather, the logical–contextual history of philosophy is, like the traditional school philosophies, systematic, although it develops along different lines.

1. Do Systematic Philosophers Need a History of Philosophy as Part of Their Discipline?

Analytic philosophers often claim that the history of philosophy is scarcely of value for them. Michael Frede (1988, p. 669), for example, argued that "most of the history of philosophy is of no or little philosophical interest to us." The same opinion is held by Calvin Normore (1990, p. 225) and Jorge Gracia, according to whom "philosophy is not necessarily dependent on its history" (Gracia, 1992, p. 118). To Gilbert Harman is attributed the catchphrase: "History of Philosophy: Just Say No!," which was allegedly sometimes displayed on his office door at Princeton University (see Sorell, 2005, p. 44).

Apparently, what these authors mean by "us" here is not just "analytic philosophy" but any kind of philosophy which put stress on advancing new arguments and theories instead of on discussing arguments and theories developed by past masters. In the German-speaking academy, non-historical philosophy is conventionally called "systematic philosophy."[1]

A first rejoinder to these authors is, ironically, historical: It is a well-known fact that radical, positive developments in history of philosophy have led in the past to revolutions in systematic philosophy. Here are three examples:

(i) The rediscovery of Aristotle's texts in Western Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries transformed the philosophy of the time.

Discussions of them stimulated the authors to explore new themes in philosophy. This development culminated in the imposing corpus of Aquinas's writings.

(ii) Despite the fact that he remained in shadow, there was one name that dominated the dramatic rise of the German university philosophy in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was Adolf Trendelenburg,[2] who in the words of Rudolf Eucken (1886, p. 114) "introduced a historical treatment of the problems, which combined the efforts of today with the work of the past millenniums." It is this methodological revolution that in large measure set the stage for the Golden Age of the German school philosophy, which reached its apogee in the line of thinkers running from Frege, Wittgenstein, and Carnap, to Husserl and Heidegger.[3]

(iii) A number of analytic philosophers introduced new themes of investigation after intensive studies in the history of philosophy. Roderick Chisholm and Michael Dummett, for example, inspired mountains of analytic literature on topics related to their studies, respectively, of Franz Brentano and Gottlob Frege.

2. Why Do We Need a History of Philosophy? (Or the Trouble with Philosophy as Such)

At this stage of our study, we shall turn our attention to a problem with philosophy as such, namely that even philosophers of genius cannot, in principle, write down their completely finished story. They only suggest *steps* that their followers and interpreters explore and develop further in more articulated form. This characteristic feature of the greatest works of speculative thought can be called the "Indeterminateness of Philosophy." It was best articulated by Dieter Henrich who has claimed that a newly discovered connection (*Zusammenhang*) by a great philosopher can never be made clear enough at the first onset. The grasp of how it is constructed, i.e. which element goes together with which in it, is a completely new problem that is to be solved by interpreters.[4]

Exactly this latter problem is the proper subject of historians of philosophy, as we see it. They chart the map of concepts and problems of earlier philosophical masters, in all their variation and provenance. In this sense the historians of philosophy develop the worth of their great forebears in the discipline. They explore lines of thought in past philosophy which the masters themselves never explicitly pursued. Moreover, they also explicate the logic of the relations between ideas of a given philosopher and those of the others.

Unfortunately, the more important the contribution of an author in philosophy is, such as that of Aristotle and Kant, the more nuanced and

many-sided is his theory. Quite different lines of thought connect to one another. Furthermore, they are also connected with philosophical concepts and problems of other philosophers: friends and rivals.

In view of the foregoing, one can enumerate the tasks of the historian of philosophy this way:

(i) to explicate elements of different range and level of specific philosophical works;
(ii) to relate these elements in a logical net; to draw up their map;
(iii) to relate them logically to the ideas of other philosophers: predecessors, contemporaries, successors—whether or not they are members of the philosopher's school or group;
(iv) to try to develop them further in their authentic sense.

3. The History of Philosophy as Systematic Philosophy

To sum up the results we have reached so far: the task of the historian of philosophy is to draw the map of the concepts, problems, ideas and arguments raised in systematic philosophy; to track down the roots of the theories, concepts and problems employed by the canonical figures of philosophy with the aim of tracing new logical connections between them. The philosophical historian's task proceeds along two directions: (i) searching for origins (sources) of particular problems and concepts; (ii) reporting how other philosophers use these particular concepts and problems in their own different ways. The ultimate—"regulative"—goal is to delineate with the greatest precision possible how the systematic philosophical problems and concepts, past and present, interrelate in formally determinate ways.[5]

In this sense, as the charting the map of problems and concepts originating with major thinkers, the discipline of the history of philosophy is systematic as well. Hence, it cannot stand opposed to systematic philosophy. Rather, we have two systematic philosophical disciplines, the first of which develops a system in one direction only, while the second investigates the connections of the theories and concepts of a particular philosopher with concepts and theories of selected predecessors and successors, including thinkers who champion alternative philosophical programs.

Historians of philosophy, who are systematic, approach the thought of major figures of the past in ways sharply at variance with those of analytic philosophers, including Moore, Russell, Strawson and Price. The analytic

philosopher typically selects a concept of an earlier thinker, say Peter Strawson's notion of presupposition, and tries to develop it further.[6] The historian of philosophy, in contrast, strives to discover a net of logical dependencies in the writings of a particular philosopher, or of different thinkers, who utilized this concept or theory. Furthermore, as long as the historian is engaged in a synoptic enterprise such as charting the web of conceptual interrelations, he investigates *every* nuance of the problems and concepts left by the philosopher under consideration—independently of the thinker's particular theoretical interest.[7] The task is to comprehensively reconstruct, in their full complexity, the ideas of the selected philosopher.

4. The History of Philosophy as the Study of the Logical Geography of Concepts

One way to develop history of philosophy as logical geography is to advance it as history of philosophical concepts. In order to illustrate this point, the present section briefly sketches an example.

Wilhelm Tennemann (1710–1790) was perhaps the first to try to trace the logical development of one philosophical system into another. In this he was followed by Hegel, who saw past philosophers as struggling with problems, not simply as holding views. As Passmore (1967, p. 228) put is: "[Hegel] paid very little attention to anything except the internal logical relations between theories." This approach was best articulated in Windelband (1892) and was developed further by Nicolai Hartmann, who insisted that the proper subject of history of philosophy is philosophical problems.[8]

Hartmann, however, did not stop at that point. He knew that history of philosophy, which tracks down the logical connections between problems and theories, can easily become one-sided, losing sight of how philosophy develops in reality. Hegel's history of philosophy exemplifies these dangers best.

Apparently, such considerations motivated Hartmann to look for a unit of investigation in the history of philosophy simpler than problems—and he found it in philosophical concepts. "Indeed," says Hartmann, "the 'concept' is, in a strict sense, a definable basic moment. It is reduced from the systematic problem—something like its abbreviation" (Hartmann, 1910, p. 466). In other words, concepts are the atoms, and problems are the molecules of historical–philosophical inquiry. In this sense, Hartmann suggested a program for a history of philosophy that describes the ways that concepts develop diachronically in philosophy.[9] His hope was that this program would radically diminish the possibility of theoretical errors in this discipline.

What follows are two examples of how the history of analytic philosophy can be developed as history of concepts:

(i) In his review article of Carnap's (1949) *Meaning and Necessity*, and especially in his paper "The Theory of Meaning," Gilbert Ryle (1957) was adamant that "the word-meanings do not stand to sentence-meanings as atoms to molecules" (Ryle, 1971, vol. 2, p. 359). Indeed, while single words refer to objects, when in sentences, words denote only as parts of the whole. This is shown by the fact that the meanings of some words, in particular, those, which are only used in the context of a sentence, are learned in use only, not by direct acquaintance with what they supposedly denote.

In truth, this element of Ryle's philosophy of language was nothing but a vague formulation of the context principle—despite the fact that he did not call it that way at the time. He claimed that it was introduced by Plato, then revived by Kant. It was forgotten after that, only to be rediscovered by Wittgenstein in the 1930s, and later adopted by Ryle himself, as well as by his friends the ordinary language philosophers. By contrast, Mill, Frege, Carnap and in a sense also Russell and Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* make no use of this principle, but rather of the "Fido"–Fido theory of meaning, according to which one name always corresponds to one object.

This history shows (a) how difficult, tentative and incremental is the process of determining the exact place on the philosophy-map where a concept employed by different influential thinkers belongs. Ryle strove mightily to trace down the historical development of the context principle but failed. This was done only by Michael Dummett in his paper "Nominalism" (1958), where he identified it as the claim that "the word-meanings do not stand to sentence-meanings as atoms to molecules."[10] Dummett argued that the context principle was (re)discovered by Frege, was randomly used by Russell and fully embraced by Wittgenstein, and then rediscovered by him—Dummett. In the light of this finding, Ryle's claim that Frege subscribed to the "Fido"–Fido theory of meaning is clearly mistaken. (b) It also shows that philosophy exhibits both progress and regression. So far as Ryle's general historical contention is defensible, it substantiates this fact: after the context principle was discovered by Plato, it was practically forgotten for over 2000 years, only to be independently introduced by Kant.[11]

(ii) Not long ago, it was generally accepted that Moore was the philosopher who introduced the concept of "sense-data" in philosophy—in his lectures

"On Metaphysics," delivered in 1910/11, but published only in 1953 as *Some Main Problems of Philosophy.* In fact, the term was coined by Josiah Royce in l882—under the influence of his German teacher of philosophy Hermann Lotze—and picked up by William James, after which Russell employed it in a number of manuscripts and articles he composed in the years 1896 through 1898. In the summer of 1898, however, Russell fundamentally rethought his philosophy and he dropped the term. Moreover, he forgot that he had used it. When in 1911, after another turn in his thinking, he encountered it in the manuscript of Moore's lectures "On Metaphysics," it struck him as a revelation. Subsequently, he adopted it as an epistemological term of art, for example, in his *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912).

Above all, this story shows that the concept of "sense-data" is rather different from Hume's "impressions" with which it is often confused.[12] It was introduced, above all, to indicate the objective content of perceptions under the influence of ideas laid out in Lotze's *Logic* (1874) and *Metaphysics* (1879). It deserves noting that parallel to the introduction of the idea of objective content of perceptions in philosophy, Lotze introduced the concept of "states of affairs" to signify the objective content of judgement. The concept was adopted by his pupil Carl Stumpf, and developed later by both Husserl and Wittgenstein.[13]

This paper undertakes to remix Hartmann's program for a gap-free logicizing history of philosophy. In particular, we shall apply it not only to philosophical concepts, but also to philosophical problems, arguments and theories. In fact, the history-of-concepts approach is, if paradigmatic, only one example of framing a "logical-contextual history of philosophy."

5. What Is the Logical–Contextual History of Philosophy?

In a recent paper, David Bell has demonstrated that Moore's "New Look" philosophy, later called "analytic," was formatively influenced by Franz Brentano through Moore's teacher George Stout. Neither Moore nor Russell discovered or invented it whole-cloth. To credit this influence on the philosophy of Moore–Russell is to appreciate how it arose concomitantly with the emergence of psychology as a discipline in its own right, more specifically the analytic psychology developed by Brentano. This historical fact changes its place on the logical map of philosophies and philosophers. Bell (1999, p. 201) concludes that "we can gain an historical understanding of the form in which analytic philosophy emerged in Moore's early writings, on the basis of an understanding of the appropriate context."

Suggestive as Bell's analysis in this paper is, his identification of this

perspective as "historical understanding" is rather problematic. In the genealogy of the concept of "sense-data" described above, in Section 6 (ii), we saw that the concept originated with the move to assert objectivity of the content of mind, initiated already in the 1840s by Trendelenburg and Hermann Lotze. From this perspective, we saw the concept of "sense-data" in a connection that is radically different from its linkage with Humean "impressions." Apparently, this context of the concept "sense-data" is not merely historical; rather, it also reveals the relatedness of this theoretical construction with Lotze's conception that the mind has objective content. The task of the systematic historian of philosophy is just this: to place philosophical concepts and problems on a constantly adjusted map of their genealogical and logical development; or to draw ever more detailed maps of what Ryle called "philosophical geography." In this case, the task is to connect the concepts of "sense-data" and "states of affairs" with the concept of objective mental content.

Seen this way, the project of this type of history of philosophy is to trace diachronically the steps in the construction of a philosophical theory. What may be called the *logical–contextual history of philosophy* thus investigates the logical context of problems and concepts of the philosophical masters of the past.

To make this project more readily comprehensive, we shall build on the discrimination already established in the literature between a philosophical history of philosophy and a non-philosophical history of philosophy. More specifically, we shall take the concept of a logical–contextual history of philosophy as a further development or major variant of the philosophical history of philosophy.[14]

Notes

[1] Cf. also Dummett (1975).

[2] Cf. Köhnke (1986).

[3] Beaney (2005), among others, sees German philosophy between 1870 and 1914 as dominating the discipline worldwide.

[4] Cf. Henrich (1976, p. 9).

[5] In fact, this final product would synthesize the historical map with the actual map of concepts into an integral map of concepts and problems.

[6] Cf. Stalnaker (1973).

[7] Daniel Garber called this approach "disinterested history of philosophy." Cf. Garber (1988, p. 33).

[8] Cf. Hartmann (1910).

[9] In the English-speaking world, Hartmann's idea for a history of concepts was echoed in A. O. Lovejoy's project for a "history of ideas," which concentrates

on the history of the *unit–ideas* by which theories in philosophy can be analysed. Cf. Mandelbaum (1965, pp. 35 ff).

[10] Cf. Dummett (1956).

[11] On progress and regression in philosophy see Nelson (1962).

[12] For an example of their confusion see Sellars (1963, p. 140), where this author claims that Russell's sense-data are "inner episodes."

[13] Cf. Milkov (2002).

[14] The work on this paper was generously supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. Its first variant of was read at the British Society for the History of Philosophy Conference, "History of Analytic Philosophy: Helping to Bring an Unfinished Project to its Conclusion," Oxford, St. Anne's College. I am thankful for helpful comments from G. A. J. Rogers and Tom Sorrel.

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