

Contemporary Metaphysicians and Their Traditions

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When invited to consider the methodology of contemporary metaphysics, quite a number of procedures spring to mind as part of the metaphysician's toolkit. These include: eliciting and relying on intuitions; solving location problems and using “conceptual analysis”; inference to the best theory, both on internal metaphysical grounds and drawing from the theoretical reaches of the sciences; working on topics clearly close to, or even overlapping, those of other areas of inquiry using techniques of those other areas; achieving coherence with other theories developed with other aims; and employing deductive reasoning to yield surprising conclusions. Many of these techniques are associated with significant and growing literatures about their scope, epistemic justification, suitability to different metaphysical problems, and so on.

In this paper, though, I want to focus on another aspect of the method of contemporary metaphysics. A lot of what metaphysicians do when they are being trained and then in their professional research is to engage with metaphysical traditions and the history of their discipline. We spend a lot of time discovering not only the letter but the animating spirit of views other than our own, even views about issues that we are not currently working on. Many of us read the metaphysical writings of historical figures. When someone does a PhD on a metaphysical topic, the immersion in a discipline and one or more traditions is one of the noticeable effects. Surely all of this makes a difference to the outputs of metaphysical investigations.

I want to argue in this paper that engagement with traditions of various sorts is an important part of the methodology of contemporary metaphysics. I think this is so as a matter of descriptive fact—metaphysicians *are* significantly influenced and work to bring themselves under this influence in a significant way—and also as a normative matter—metaphysicians *ought* to be significantly engaged with their traditions and past in order to do metaphysics well. I will also discuss how these traditions can provide advantages and what dangers they pose: both in our engagement with contemporaries and with the work of figures in the history of metaphysics.

First, some caveats. I will restrict my discussion to contemporary metaphysics as it is practiced in the mainstream Anglo-American tradition.¹ My second caveat will be that my remarks about method in metaphysics are not informed by the sort of sociology which does exist, in varying quality, for some areas of the natural sciences. The question of how metaphysicians do, in fact, interact with their traditions is a sociological question, and one that the practitioners themselves may not be the best placed to answer, caught up as we are in justificatory myths about why we do the things we do, myths which may be kept in place by institutional pressures not immediately obvious to us. The normative questions of how we should engage with tradition are not purely sociological, I take it, though even these may be informed by information about what practices are feasible or sustainable. While mindful of the dangers of armchair sociology, I hope that when I do generalise about metaphysicians the generalisations will strike chords, and ideally not just in the circles I happen to move in but more generally. It should also be kept in mind that nearly any generalisation about a group as diverse and individualistic as metaphysicians will face some counterexamples: I will be pleased enough if what I say applies to most individuals and the work they do.

Traditions are not just inevitable and given. Metaphysicians can do work to engage with traditions, both by reading previous writers, and by engaging in projects of evaluating previous theories and the reasons offered for and against them. Some traditions are very old—several contemporary metaphysicians take inspiration from Aristotle, and others are inspired by work of Plato and other ancients. Other metaphysicians find inspiration in the writing of Hume or Leibniz, and others seek inspiration in the work of Frege. Many other examples of using the work of the great historical figures could be given, and this is not usually through an involuntary and effortless stamp from a metaphysical tradition—it has taken intellectual work and effort to engage with the work of historical figures and to be shaped by it.

The influence of tradition is not merely felt through the reading of historical figures. Perhaps the greatest influence on most Anglo-American metaphysicians today is the

¹ I wish there was a better expression for the tradition I mean, since it is not only practiced in England and North America, and many philosophers in those parts of the world do not belong to this “Anglo-American” tradition.

work in metaphysics in the second half of the twentieth century, including the work being done by others today. Again, this influence is not automatic. A significant amount of metaphysicians' effort is keeping abreast of what others have said and argued, and arguing with their colleagues and students. Some contemporary influence is difficult to avoid—it is no accident that metaphysicians are often broadly in sympathy with the views of their PhD supervisors, for example—but other influences are actively sought out, and metaphysicians will go to some effort to work out what the letter and spirit is of contemporaries' positions.

Somewhat artificially, let me divide my discussion of interaction with contemporary traditions and engagement with the history of metaphysics. In the next section I will discuss the "schools" that metaphysicians find themselves in, followed by a section addressing the question of how we should engage with these schools to maximise the benefit to be derived from them for doing good work while minimising the dangers they can pose. Then I will discuss engagement with the history of metaphysics, though not comprehensively given the many cans of worms to be opened concerning our relationship to the history of ideas.

Paradigms and Schools

Metaphysicians as a whole do not share much of a "paradigm" in Kuhn's sense (or senses).² There is very little agreement even about what metaphysicians should be doing, or premises that can be taken for granted across the board, or techniques for tackling new problems that receive universal endorsement. There are very few works which every metaphysician could be expected to have read. When it comes to entire books, it may be that there is no single metaphysics book that all analytic metaphysicians have read all the way through, or at most a tiny handful of such books. (Try writing a list containing many more entries than *Naming and Necessity* (Kripke 1980) and checking it at the next big gathering of metaphysicians you attend.) Articles might do slightly better: you may be able to find a dozen or two that nearly

² Kuhn seems to have meant many different things by "paradigm", and his theory of how they operate is probably too restrictive. But some successor notion seems to me to have a lot to tell us about some areas of academic inquiry. Kuhn's 1970 (first edition 1962) is the *locus classicus*, and see its 1969 postscript for a discussion of some of the things meant by "paradigm": I intend to pick up on the first sense he discusses there. See also Masterman 1970 for an exhaustive discussion of the different things Kuhn seems to mean by "paradigm".

all metaphysicians have read, though even here there is a tendency for people to have an idea of what was said in a paper without having read the work itself. As for other tools, surely there are a few pieces of intellectual equipment that are widespread: examples might include some facility with first order classical predicate calculus; some grasp of at least some of the notions of supervenience; and some sense of what the metaphysical projects were of Hume, Russell, Quine, Davidson, and maybe some others figures.³

Of course each metaphysician, even those least interested in a tradition or the history of metaphysics, will be familiar with much more than this. But two metaphysicians can be recognizably in the Anglo-American tradition and yet have widely divergent backgrounds and assumptions. Rather than seeing metaphysicians as sharing most of the assumptions they make about the substantial truths of their field and the ways to tackle outstanding problems, it is better, I think, to see metaphysicians as belonging to smaller intellectual traditions that may be in active conflict with each other.

Metaphysicians tend to shape their thinking in connection with *schools* of metaphysical thought. Metaphysicians heavily influenced by David Lewis's work would be an example, unless that already lumps together schools that are better kept separate, as would metaphysicians concerned to vindicate a Kripkean metaphysical viewpoint. Another school, it seems to me, is formed by those heavily influenced by the sort of Oxford-based linguistic philosophy of which Michael Dummett is a paradigm and Peter Strawson an important figure in the intellectual background.

One point to immediately note about such schools is that they exist at different levels of generality: those metaphysicians whose work stands in significant lines of descent from Willard Quine, for example, include Lewisians, Davidsonians, Putnamians (and the intellectual descendants of different stages of Putnam probably differ as much

³ Here's an interesting question to test how much commonality metaphysicians as a group have: would a metaphysician ever learn very much about metaphysics from sitting in on the introductory undergraduate metaphysics course (which might be a second or third level undergraduate course) taught by another? I suspect the answer is often yes, and that the same could not be said for many other sub-disciplines in academia: organic chemists sitting in on an introduction to organic chemistry, historians of the Roman republic sitting in on an introduction to the Roman republic, and so on. Perhaps the generalisation that specialists would not learn about their subject area by going to introductory undergraduate lectures on it might be more true in the natural sciences than the humanities: but that itself might suggest that the humanities is less in the grip of paradigms along broadly Kuhnian lines than the natural sciences.

from each other as they do to any non-Putnamian), and many others. Another point to note immediately is that any individual metaphysician, even if they count as being in one school or another, will have many influences from other traditions. I suspect many metaphysicians do not readily self-identify as belonging to a metaphysical school ("I'm a Sellarsian", "I'm an Armstrongian", "I'm a Mellorian" or whatever). I share this reluctance, but insofar as I would self-identify, I would want to include myself in a few camps, perhaps overlapping ones. I suppose if forced to say I would identify myself in the Australian Realist camp, though maybe I would be the only one that would use that expression unprompted for that group of philosophers.

("Australian Materialist" as a label for a position in the philosophy of mind, and perhaps also in metaphysics, would be more standard, though obviously it would exclude people in a broadly Australian Realist tradition who were not materialists, such as Peter Forrest and earlier stages of Frank Jackson). But I would also be fairly described as heavily influenced by David Lewis—I would not describe myself as a Lewisian in metaphysics because it seems to me that I disagree too greatly with Lewis's views, but maybe an outsider would see the differences as splitting hairs.

One point that must be kept in mind when talking of the intellectual groups that metaphysicians belong to is that many metaphysicians would resist being thought of as belonging to any very specific "school" (at least not unless they were the school's leading member). At least this seems to be so for the metaphysicians I have talked to about this: there is always the possibility that this was an unrepresentative sample. But it is reasonably rare in metaphysicians writings for them to identify themselves as belonging to a school, even if they are willing to classify others in this way. If this is so, what explains it? Are metaphysicians unaware that their outlook and approach is shaped by previous intellectual influences? I think that is unlikely. I have two guesses to offer about what the source of this reluctance might be: one concerns connotations that "school" as a word for an intellectual group might have, and the other involves a concern about what is connoted by *saying* that one belongs to a school.

Perhaps metaphysicians are reluctant to describe themselves as belonging to a school because they think that implies an intention to avoid disagreeing with the doctrine of that school, or that it suggests they agree with all points of the "core" of a tradition, or

that they think it suggests that they are influenced by that school out of all proportion to their other intellectual influences. If someone belongs to a school only if those implications describe their intentions and beliefs, then "school" is indeed the wrong word for what I am trying to discuss. The intellectual communities that metaphysicians are affiliated with need be none of those things. Indeed, one way to tell which school (or whatever we should call it) a metaphysician belongs to is to look at who that metaphysician spends the most print *disagreeing* with: there can be disagreements and clashes across affiliational lines, of course, but often the existence of shared programs and shared assumptions makes fruitful disagreement easier.

Alternatively, it may be that metaphysicians are not averse to counting as belonging to schools, but there is something about *saying* that one is in a school that is distasteful. Perhaps if a metaphysician proclaims himself to belong to a school that suggests that he is too proud of being influenced by his school, or suggest that he is willing to accept the influence of his school uncritically. Or perhaps it suggests that he does not possess enough independence of mind or spirit to be interested in doing the kind of original work many of us prize. Or that it suggests that his range of influences is too narrow. These suggestions are not unavoidable, I hope: if I am right that many of us belong to schools, then when we recognise that fact and admit it I do not believe that we are thereby revealed as uncritical, unoriginal, or suffer from an inadequate range of influences. Still, if those are the assumptions that people would be inclined to make, it would explain why some metaphysicians are reluctant to own up to belonging to schools.

How do these schools manifest? Belonging to the same metaphysical school is presumably a many-faceted thing, and it would be foolish for me to venture an "X is co-schooled with Y iff..." account of the connection. I suspect that each of the things I will mention can be absent in some pairs of metaphysicians who belong to the same school, especially as two individuals can belong to the same school through their connections to others. But here are some suggestions for some important markers, made somewhat tentatively: I would love some good anthropological/sociological work on the groupings of contemporary metaphysicians, but until then the best I can do is generalising from a handful of cases plus some informed guesswork.

There will often be overlap in metaphysical views and theories. Some of that overlap will not be immediately obvious, because it will often fall in areas that people in the school tend to take for granted. This is not to say that people in the same school will necessarily agree on more than they will with anyone outside that school – but I predict there will be clustering of metaphysical opinions corresponding at least roughly to school lines. As well as an overlap of views, there will often be overlap in opinions about what the main contenders are. Even metaphysicians with widely divergent opinions about a certain matter may have a good deal of agreement about relative rankings, and I predict agreement over the views to be taken seriously will be even greater among people of the same metaphysical school than agreement about which doctrines are in fact correct.

Connected to this, and perhaps even more significant, will be opinions about which metaphysical doctrines can be taken for granted and which, even if one is confident that they are true, are ripe for debate and defence. Attitudes about what can be taken for granted will also extend to attitudes about, for example, which metaphysical issues are obviously important and which ones require more than usual justification when one is taking them seriously. They will also extend to what sort of justification is considered a good one to offer: to justify an interest in issue A by pointing out the difference it makes to the debate about issue B is only going to seem satisfactory if we can take issue B to be important. Of course personal variation plays a great role in people's attitudes to what can be taken for granted, and there are other factors too: but school affiliation seems to me to be one of the relevant factors.

There will be some commonalities in which figures are read and who people talk to about their work. These commonalities may be even less robust than commonalities in doctrine: for example, the people I talk philosophy with the most are often my colleagues, whether or not they share any school-like affiliations. There are too many influences on what we read and who we talk to besides school affiliation, and I suspect influences like proximity, topic being worked on, past reading and talking, etc. will often outweigh school affiliation.

Finally, school affiliation is connected to how others perceive someone and their work. Partly this is a matter of using school affiliation as evidence—if so and so is a

PHier, then she will likely have views about these topics, not much time for that position, etc. (No doubt these inferences are often flawed, and excessive stereotyping helps nobody, but it would be hard to avoid making some assumptions about where someone might be coming from and what they are likely to believe when engaging with them.) However, I suspect that perceptions of where someone is located in relation to others' positions can be partly constitutive of what group they belong to. This is not to say that people cannot make mistakes of classification, of course, but membership of social groups, even metaphysical schools, is a social matter and plausibly depends on which groupings are seen as significant by others.

So much for what might determine what schools there are and who belongs to them. How should we respond to these institutional patterns? I think they are not epiphenomena, nor a mere backdrop to our work – they can be important for doing good work in metaphysics, and also pose some dangers. The discussion that follows will necessarily be rather general, but hopefully will help metaphysicians consider how to best interact with the schools they encounter.

3. Advantages and Disadvantages of Schools

Suppose I am right that there are communities of intellectual affiliation broadly of the sort that I am calling "schools" among contemporary metaphysicians. These would then have an important methodological impact in a variety of ways—they would influence which problems a metaphysician considers pressing, whose work they are particularly likely to follow, and what starting assumptions and modes of proceeding are taken as legitimate. But what attitude should we take to this influence by tradition? Which aspects of this influence are good, and to be encouraged, and which are to be guarded against?

Let me begin with a discussion of some of the obvious virtues and vices, before moving to discuss some of the less obvious ones. The most obvious benefit from engaging with a tradition, both through reading past work and discussing things with colleagues, is that this provides a source of arguments and evidence. Others who have considered similar questions will have collected some evidence already—this evidence might be intuition reports, proofs that certain combinations of views are inconsistent, reports of discoveries from the empirical sciences, and so on. (I am

happy to use "evidence" pretty broadly for current purposes.) There may well be no clear line between "evidence" for metaphysical views and the value of arguments, since those arguments may often take pieces of evidence as providing premises. But the distinction is still useful to draw, if only to point out that showing how different commitments interact, and surprising results can emerge from applying commonly accepted standards of argument from commonly accepted premises. Argumentation in metaphysics is not a trivial undertaking.

Other benefits are about equally obvious. A tradition can be a source of problems and questions as well as putative answers to those questions and problems—many practicing metaphysicians can attest to the value of asking the right question, and many people's sense of the discipline is defined by what problems and questions people tackle. There is also transmission of technique for dealing with metaphysical questions—the know how of the discipline as well as the know-that. Metaphysicians do not tend to articulate that part of our business as much as we might (though for a paper on some kinds of philosophical know-how, see Hájek unpublished). But I suspect most of us would acknowledge the role of a teacher or other influence in shaping how we do our job, as well as what materials we do it with. Finally, a community is important for criticism, both to check our work and find errors, and to suggest ways of improving and expanding work we have done on our own.

There are some obvious risks and drawbacks to being influenced by a tradition and seeing oneself as part of a community. If someone preferentially engages with work in their own tradition, plus work in other traditions sanctioned as worthy by their own tradition, they obviously risks neglecting good work done elsewhere. There is also the risk that certain principles become "dead dogma", in J.S. Mill's sense: assumptions that should be subject to scrutiny go unchallenged because the tradition takes them so much for granted. "Dead dogma" can be harmful both because errors go uncorrected, but also because truths can be underexplored and underexploited: sometimes if a position was subject to live scrutiny and believers were aware of why that doctrine should be taken to be correct, they would be in a better position to extend the relevant insight and see what other views should go along with it.

One obvious way to minimise this risk is to devote some portion of one's attention to work well outside one's tradition, and well outside those works frequently discussed in it. Of course many metaphysicians already do this—in my opinion most of the best metaphysicians do. Trying to work out why partisans of other views consider one's own views and methods are mistaken can be particularly valuable.

Finally, engagement with a tradition can be harmful because it leads to errors being compounded. If new work starts off from a position reached by previous inquiry, then if that previous inquiry contains serious mistakes, the new position is liable to go much further into error than an inquirer would who was starting from scratch.

Uncontroversial examples will be hard to find: but a look at post-Hegelian philosophy suggests to me that a lot of mistakes and foolishness occurred because people took Hegel's incorrect conclusions as their starting point. Indeed, Hegel's own work can be seen as due to his kicking off from a Kantian framework. At least for a realist like me, Hegelian objective idealism seems like a serious error: and one that might not have been committed if Hegel had not been working in a tradition that had already made the serious mistake of Kant's transcendental idealism. Of course those who think that Kant or Hegel were roughly right about metaphysical matters are unlikely to judge the lineage from Kant to Hegel to many post-Hegelians as a descent into error: but presumably they can find lineages which disagree with them that will illustrate my point about the risk of error being compounded by more error.

So much for obvious advantages and dangers. But I think there are other benefits and drawbacks that come from engagement with a metaphysical tradition. I will focus on these less obvious advantages, since the drawbacks are often the flip sides of those advantages—whenever there is a mechanism that can help us go right, it can malfunction and have us go wrong.

In many areas of inquiry, testimony is vital: a lot of what I know about the world, I know because people told me. When metaphysicians find things out, they tell other metaphysicians: so reading and listening to other metaphysicians on the face of it could be a source of knowledge through testimony. This is uncontroversial for testimony about evidence. But could I rely on a metaphysician's testimony to judge that her conclusions were correct? That is less obvious. One problem is that even

good metaphysicians often end up with false conclusions, and we are in a position to know this often happens: when there is widespread genuine disagreement, as there often is, all but perhaps one of the competing options are mistaken. Knowing this, can metaphysicians be seen as trustworthy enough about their metaphysical pronouncements? Even if they could, on occasion, be trusted, there is the further question of whether metaphysicians in their professional capacity ever should do this, or whether they should always check for themselves if a metaphysical question is at stake.

I think testimony can properly be a source of information about metaphysical conclusions despite these problems. Clearly the first challenge is a serious one (and not merely in the form where it is so strong it would lead to scepticism about metaphysics). Perhaps we should never take someone's unsupported say-so to give us the answer to a metaphysical question, though even this may depend on the choice of the example question.⁴ But testimony need not transfer warrant through *merely* taking someone's word for something. Testimony is more reliable when we know the testifier has a lot of other correct beliefs about an area, or we know the testifier is particularly good at telling what the truth is. We can have these attitudes to other metaphysicians. If Anne has background beliefs that I take to be correct, and I have verified a track record of Anne often getting the solutions to metaphysical puzzles correct in the past, then I am in a much better position to take Anne's word for a metaphysical claim than someone who only knows that Anne writes on metaphysics. And if she and I have been correct in the past, non-accidentally believing the truth about the matters in question, then her say-so puts me in a better position to know the new thing than it would to someone who has no idea about her track record, let alone someone who reasonably believes that Anne is in general completely misguided metaphysically.

⁴ For example, we could take someone's say-so that there is a chair in the next room, despite those metaphysicians who deny the existence of chairs. Or to take a question once taken seriously by metaphysicians, we could be happy to allow the question of whether the solid material on the moon was the same kind of thing as the rocks on the Earth's surface could be settled on the say-so of NASA geologists.

When we have this additional kind of evidence that Anne is likely to get things right in metaphysics, it seems to me at least that we can be justified in believing her testimony about somewhat abstruse metaphysical issues. What about the issue of methodological propriety—*should* a metaphysician ever take another's word about metaphysical conclusions? We do want metaphysicians to be critical, even of what their friends and allies say, and it would not be a very interesting metaphysical work that simply appealed to authority at every turn. On the other hand, there are many metaphysical issues to settle. Most of us are not even opinionated about all of them, and no metaphysician has explicitly defended all of their metaphysical opinions. Furthermore, metaphysical issues are interconnected: what one says about the existence of events through time often depends on what one says about the existence of objects through time, for example. (For a sense of how many metaphysical issues can be connected to one topic, look at the range of issues touched upon in David Lewis's *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Lewis 1986), which is ostensibly primarily a defence of one doctrine, the existence of concrete possible worlds.)

What is a metaphysician to do who realises that a range of metaphysical issues impinge on the one she is currently working on, but also realises that she has not personally argued for conclusions on all of those related topics? She could try making sure she knows of good arguments for conclusions on each of the related topics, e.g. by critically engaging with those who have offered arguments. (But where did they get their warrant for their starting points on every question related to theirs?) She could present her work as highly conditional—*if* the thing to think on these ten other topics is $X_1, X_2, X_3 \dots X_{10}$, *then* my conclusion is.... . But making explicit every assumption made is tedious, difficult to do in practice, and not always the best use of one's time. She could wait until she has a complete system of the world before publishing any of it—but apart from any other problems, it is hard to see how to get there without embracing some metaphysical positions along the way. There are probably other, equally infeasible, demands we could imagine making of our metaphysician. Perhaps the best thing we could demand of her is that she does her best in a quick-and-dirty way to come up with reasonable things to say about most of the impinging issues. This seems to be one of the places where relying on the conclusions of trusted metaphysicians is an excellent place to start, and so is a place

where relying on metaphysical testimony seems to be positively advisable, rather than forbidden.

Another advantage of belonging to a tradition, particularly one with other contemporaries, is that possibility of group work. We are often used to thinking of philosophical systems as being the product and responsibility of just one person: not that the system is uninfluenced by others, of course, but that it is put together by one philosopher. But of course systems of thought can be created by teams as well. Indeed, the best version of a system may not correspond to the views of any individual. The best naturalism about the normative, for example, might incorporate the work of some people in ethics, some in epistemology, some in aesthetics, etc. The best four-dimensionalism about time and objects in time might not be quite the view of any particular writer, but some combination. Ideally, of course, eventually individuals will end up holding the entirety of the best theory of a given sort: and we are often trying to do that when we decide which theory to endorse. Much more attention could be given to the advantages and drawbacks of group intellectual work.⁵

It may be that to some extent people cannot help how they have been influenced by traditions and schools: or at any rate that certain kinds of influences cannot be helped *now*, even if they could have been influenced by e.g. the decision about where to go to graduate school. It may also be that some of the influence of a tradition and school is not even noticed or recognized: surely we are not aware of every intellectual influence on us and how strong each of them are. But there is an extent to which the influence from our traditions can be shaped by rational reflection and individual judgement, and this is the space in which we can try to take more advantage of the benefits and minimise the drawbacks of traditions.

I want to suggest that some explicit reflection on how you have been shaped by the metaphysical traditions that have influenced you can be beneficial. What have you learned from those traditions? Which issues do they suggest are important? Are there any metaphysical doctrines that your tradition(s) take for granted? Have you accepted any of your current metaphysical opinions on the basis of testimony?

⁵ For one promising beginning, see Kitcher 1993, chapter 8.

Of course, this suggestion will not be new to a lot of people—some may have been consciously aware of these influences on their views already. Likewise for the suggestion that metaphysicians should devote some time to avoiding the dangers of inheriting a tradition. Metaphysicians should foray into reading work from quite different traditions from time to time to avoid the risk of insularity. They should also scrutinise their starting points from time to time, to make sure (to the extent one can) that they are not marching up blind alleys. Again, this is not necessarily news, but it may sometimes serve as useful reminders.

The History of Metaphysics and Learning from History

Contemporary metaphysicians embrace a range of attitudes to the history of our subject, ranging from virtually ignoring it and largely reading only other contemporaries, to deference to one or more historical figures to the point where, e.g. the fact that *p* was something that Aristotle said (or what he "really meant") is treated as a strong, or even decisive, argument for *p*. I find the latter sort of attitude particularly puzzling, though it is not unknown among historians of philosophy, in metaphysics and other areas. Admittedly, it is often hidden slightly under the surface: for example, in the practice of offering premises to the effect that so-and-so endorsed *p*, and then going on to argue further on the assumption that *p* has been established. Treatment of historical figures as philosophical authorities, it seems to me, is not just a recipe for sub-standard philosophical conclusions: it also distorts the practice of good history of philosophy when a writer interprets a text with an eye to making sure that the content found in it is largely true. (Not least because this tends to produce interpretations according to which the Great Figure turns out to think the same as the interpreter: and even if we had some reason to think that e.g. Aristotle was largely right, we should still be very suspicious that he largely agrees with the doctrines of any particular contemporary Aristotelian.)

The danger of reading historical figures so that they agree with the reader, and the danger of confusing the question of what is the case and what a philosopher claimed was the case, are general hazards in the study of the history of philosophy, and

probably in the history of ideas in general. Both can be guarded against.⁶ So if we are not to treat historical figures as oracles, what benefits can we expect from an engagement with the history of the discipline? I mean to ask here what benefits we can get *qua* metaphysicians. There are many benefits to be had from the study of the history of ideas, including those deriving from its intrinsic interest, but I am not trying to give an account of those other benefits here.

Many of the benefits of studying the metaphysical theories of our antecedents will be similar to those I have discussed above when listing the benefits of a tradition. The writings that come down to us can be a source of arguments and evidence; they can be a useful source of metaphysical questions and framing of issues; they can serve as templates and guides for *how* to approach problems; they can provide examples of comprehensive systems to use as jumping off points; and they may be able to function as a testimonial source for metaphysical conclusions. Of course, this last possibility will probably be realised even less for historic figures than with our contemporaries: historic figures start with the decided disadvantage that they are unaware of the work done in metaphysics in the last few decades, and many of us will find that we share fewer philosophical assumptions with them than we will with some of our contemporaries. But perhaps there is some scope for transmission of testimonial warrant: and perhaps this is the closest we can come to treating the Great Dead as oracles.

Are there any benefits for metaphysicians that can be gained *only* by studying the history of metaphysics? I doubt that there are since, if nothing else, the line between history and the work of our contemporaries is at best a blurry one, and any feature we could cite that is present in "history" will probably be present, to perhaps a reduced extent, somewhere in the work of contemporaries. Nevertheless, studying the history of metaphysics may be a particularly effective way to gain some benefits. Let us then

⁶ Here is one speculation about why the questions of what a difficult figure said, on the one hand, and whether what was said should be believed, on the other, are sometimes confused, at least initially. The psychological literature suggests that evaluating arguments while under other cognitive loads (such as distraction tasks) impairs critical thinking and increases the persuasiveness of bad arguments. (See for example Petty et al 1976). If a reader is faced with a difficult exegetical task at the same time as she is trying to evaluate the philosophical conclusions in a piece of work, we might expect less critical resistance to those conclusions than usual. If this is part of the explanation, efforts to re-evaluate the position after the exegesis is largely complete might give readers an opportunity to bring their full critical faculties to bear.

examine what some of these benefits might be: if we can find benefits that are delivered especially well by the study of history, we will have one sort of answer to those who do not think it worthwhile for contemporary metaphysicians to engage with the historical figures of our discipline.

One reason for studying the history of philosophy generally that I sometimes come across is the suggestion that it is a good way to come into contact with many of the great minds of our discipline. Why restrict our focus to those who happen to be flourishing in the early decades of the twenty-first century when we could engage with the thought of the intellectual giants across ages past? I do not want to deny that studying historical figures is one way to read the work of some of the best philosophers so far, but it is much less clear to me that it is a particularly good way. Remember that there are many more full-time philosophers now, and in the last few decades, than there were in any comparable decades before the twentieth century. The training of our contemporaries, too, is far superior to much of the training afforded to those working on philosophical topics in the past. (That is not to deny that the Academy or the medieval University of Paris might not have afforded good metaphysical training—but many more of those engaging with metaphysics had access to only a handful of books and a handful of interlocutors.) In addition, contemporaries have more of an intellectual heritage than many of the "great figures" of the past: Plato and Aristotle no doubt would have thought differently if they had been given the opportunity to read and understand Newton or Einstein. Finally, selection of philosophers now is arguably more meritocratic than in the past. I do not want to deny that class and national boundaries make a big difference to who gets the opportunity to get good philosophical training and philosophical employment: but compared to the available pool in seventeenth century Britain or the second century Roman Empire, we are much more blessed today. Apart from anything else, consider the barriers that faced women in historical times: and while today is no utopia, there are many fewer barriers to women doing philosophy and having their work taken seriously.

When we take that into account, it may well be that many or most of the best philosophical minds of the past and present are, indeed, present. This, I suspect, will strike a lot of people as initially implausible—some may be wedded to the Romantic

idea that there are a handful of geniuses in each generation, and that genius will somehow find a way. But for those of us who think that the quality of a philosopher is heavily influenced by intellectual opportunities and upbringing, a look at comparative population numbers, literacy rates, and other broad social facts like that will suggest very strongly that the present and recent past will contain more of the best than many centuries in the past.

It may be responded that even if most of the best of the past and present are present, or in the recent past, still we can expect a higher quality of work in the historical figures we are likely to study. Perhaps there were very few philosophers of the first rank in ancient Athens, and perhaps there are as many or more in California today: but we have the verdict of history that among the philosophers based in Athens it is worth reading Plato and Aristotle, while there is not yet any verdict of history about contemporary California (especially when we remember that those making the best philosophical contribution in California may not all be in philosophy departments, or even universities). History, it might be argued, provides a "filter" so that the quality of the historically notable philosophers of the past is better than the average today.

That may well be right. But even if it is, that provides a reason to think that reading historical figures is a particularly good way to engage with great philosophers only if there is not some equally good, or better, filter we could use on figures of the present. And, after all, we are probably not more likely to read a random contemporary than we are to read a random historical figure, or at least not much more likely. There are guides we use in selecting which contemporaries to study, and just as we can use judgement to sort between historical figures, we can use judgement to sort between contemporaries.

We may also rightly be suspicious of the sorting procedures used to determine which historical figures are "must reads" and which are in history's dustbin. Many more Neo-Platonist works survived than ancient Stoic ones, but I do not think this is because Plotinus was a better philosopher than Chrysippus: I think it has much more to do with how congenial early Christian intellectuals found the two thinkers, and similar institutional facts. Even when the texts all survive, as they do for many eighteenth century philosophers, those that are heavily studied now may depend more

on the interests of those in the eighteenth and nineteenth century than any independent fact about the greatness of their work. And why should I trust nineteenth century philosophers more than my contemporaries?

Maybe we have time to follow a more inclusive strategy: read that work that is supposed to be good by our contemporaries, *and* read some historical figures. Surely that is what most of us do: many contemporary metaphysicians have read some Hume, some Aristotle, some Kant etc. etc. Whether we would be well served using a marginal unit of our time reading another volume written by a historical figure, or use our precious time to read the work of another contemporary, must surely be left as a matter of judgement. It is not clear, to say the least, how much engagement with the history of philosophy is justified by the appeal to reading great metaphysical work, when we remember that the opportunity cost may be less engagement with our contemporaries.

Luckily, I think there are other advantages for metaphysicians in reading the history of metaphysics. I mentioned above <p 10> that reading people immersed in different traditions can be of value. While some of contemporaries are very different from us, history provides a fund of philosophers who come from even more far-flung intellectual backgrounds (the past is another country, and all that). Plato was working in a very different intellectual milieu than we do (and Plato is partly responsible for ours being so different). Perhaps there are traces of the intellectual world of Duns Scotus around today, but even the most traditional monk of today cannot help be in a very different intellectual environment. The past is another country: or rather, many different other countries, and reading historical figures can broaden the mind at least as well as travel today.

Reading historical figures does offer one advantage that is very hard to secure from contemporaries. Important historical figures shaped many of the intellectual traditions we inherit today. If we want to understand where we or our interlocutors are "coming from", it is hard to beat reading historical figures (or at least reading about them). This sort of understanding is vital for communication. Of course, we can also understand another individual by coming to understand other contemporaries in their tradition: often a key to why a metaphysician is saying something that seems daft or

bizarre can be found in which graduate school they went to or who their supervisor was. But just because contemporary influences usually do not spread as far as the most influential ones that are temporally earlier, we can understand more about more of our contemporaries by reading historical figures than looking only at their contemporary influences. The biggest single influences on the shape of metaphysical doctrines and debates today are likely to be figures like Russell, Wittgenstein, Aristotle, Plato, Kant, and figures in the "recent history" like Quine and Davidson. If you want to understand metaphysics today—both what is behind the claims of contemporaries, and the source of your own assumptions—some study of the work of these figures seems called for.

Note that this argument does not call for trying to read the greatest historical figures per se, but the most influential. We hope, of course, that there will be a significant overlap between the two groups, but studying a bad but influential philosopher can illuminate others' thinking just as well as studying a good philosopher can. It may also make sense to try to read the good ones, even if the ultimate specific justification for reading historical figures is to understand the influence of past works: why not get the benefits of reading good metaphysics *and* the benefit of illuminating influences on contemporaries and oneself?

Reading historical figures can be useful in the ways that reading other metaphysicians can be; is particularly useful as a way of engaging with positions and traditions very different from one's own; and can have a distinctive advantage in revealing influences on contemporaries and oneself, which in turn allows one to understand them, and oneself, better. That is presumably valuable if interacting with contemporaries is valuable at all. It should be noted that if reading historical figures is valuable, then many of these sources of value will carry over to reading contemporary historians of metaphysics. The question of why we should read what historians of philosophy have to say, over and above the historical figures, is an interesting question that could use more attention than it gets. Encomiums to the great figures of history by themselves would not establish this—if reading Aristotle or Kant is so much better than reading contemporaries, why read *contemporaries'* opinions of Aristotle or Kant rather than the real thing? I will not attempt any comprehensive treatment of this question here. I think it should be sufficient to point out that historians of philosophy can make it

easier for us to understand historical figures, to bring to light aspects of their views that are not obvious on close examination, raise interesting puzzles about how different pieces of an author's work hold together, and provide useful background information to assist us in understanding a historical figure's work. All of those benefits are in addition to benefits we may gain from reading the historian's own contributions to metaphysics, which are sometimes presented intertwined with discussions of the work of historical figures.

So much for the advantages of reading the works of historical figures and their commentators. Are there specific disadvantages or dangers for metaphysicians in engaging with the writings of historical figures? I think there are unlikely to be entirely distinctive dangers, for the same reason that there are unlikely to be entirely distinctive benefits—dealing with historical figures and dealing with contemporaries are not sufficiently discontinuous. Still, there might be for all that disadvantages or dangers that are particularly acute in the historical case. The danger of confusing the exegetical issue of what F said about X and the question of what the truth about X is has already been mentioned. The dangers in engaging with traditions, mentioned above, are here as well: excessive engagement with the work of a historical figure might lead to comparative neglect of other important work, for example. But it is far from obvious that any of those dangers are particularly acute in the case of history. *If* it is true that metaphysics tends to be done better now than in the past, either because of progress in the discipline or because of the number and quality of metaphysical minds committed to the task now as opposed to the past, then a case could be made that devoting oneself to reading historical figures is likely to be less fruitful than engagement with contemporaries and their debates. But that is a pretty big *if*. Obviously, when we are trying to work out how much effort metaphysicians should devote to engaging with our history, the question of the benefits versus the opportunity costs needs to be asked and at least tentatively answered. But I would be surprised if engagement with our history was a poor use of a metaphysician's time.

One final issue should probably be mentioned before I finish my discussion of the methodological status of engagement with our history. Some suggest that it is a mistake to see historical figures as engaged in the topics contemporaries engage in (see for example Collingwood 1939 chapter 7), or to see their writing as proposing

questions, offering arguments, etc. that are of use to us today. This could either flow from scepticism about our ability to understand what the original texts meant in their original context, or confidence that we can tell, and when we do discover what they meant, we realise they meant nothing with any applicability to issues that concern us now. Both motivations seem to me to sit unstably with that conclusion. If we do not know what the texts meant, then we should not conclude that it is *wrong* to treat them as bearing on current concerns, but only that we cannot know whether we are correctly interpreting them when we do so. And if we can know what the texts meant, and they concern other issues, why is it that we cannot start being concerned about those issues too? Suppose Aristotle's use of "substance" is nothing like ours. Why can't we ask whether there is anything like Aristotelian substance, and if there isn't what is there that does the sort of thing Aristotle's substances were meant to do (if anything)?

In any case, we need not be true to the original meaning of works in order to get useful material for contemporary metaphysics from them. What seems important to me is that we can get readings of those works that supply good arguments, evidence, questions, etc. Whether those readings are accurate or misreadings seems of secondary importance.⁷ This is not to deny that there may be some reasons to find out what the correct readings are when they are available, but just to observe that from the point of view of the advantages for contemporary metaphysics, a rich misreading is often quite valuable. One way it would matter if we decided the readings of a figure we have been using are mistaken is if we were relying on the historical figure as a testimonial authority for the evidence they supply or their metaphysical conclusions: but I suspect we could jettison this part of our practice and still find much of value in extracting contemporary lessons from the writings of historical figures.

The debate about how well we can recover the ideas of historical figures will no doubt continue to simmer in the history of ideas, including the history of philosophy and specifically the history of metaphysics. It is just as well that the contemporary

⁷ Recall the many complaints by Wittgensteinians that Kripke's 1984 rule-following argument is not Wittgenstein's, and the attitude of many philosophers that Kripke's argument, Wittgenstein's or not, was more interesting than any reconstructed by orthodox Wittgenstein scholars.

metaphysician does not need to wait for that to be resolved to gain many things of value from the classic texts of our traditions.

Conclusion

Metaphysicians belong to traditions, and while these are rarely treated as uncontroversial backdrops for ongoing work in the way that Kuhnian paradigms were supposed to be, they influence a lot of the style and substance of contemporary work. This influence is not entirely given or external to an individual's work either: we engage with our traditions, and control some of how they influence the work we do. Some reflective awareness, then, of what these influences are and how we might best deal with them seems advisable. I am more sure that the presence of traditions raises important methodological questions than that I have successfully answered those questions: and indeed, detailed information about how tradition shapes our views is not easily available, so speculation about how to deal with that influence is at a rather armchair stage.

The issues that come up when we think about the influence of traditions and metaphysical communities on our work do not only concern us as researchers. Many of us also face choices about what material to present to students doing coursework, and what avenues of study to recommend to research students. Offering our students the chance to get the best from exposure to metaphysical schools is also important. Even if you and I, dear reader, already extract the good and shun the bad from our connections with metaphysical traditions and schools, some explicit articulation of how best to approach these important influences may be important to us in our role as teachers.⁸

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