

# Does Philosophy Have a Vindictory History?

## Bernard Williams on the History of Philosophy

MATTHIEU QUELOZ

*Philosophy, University of Basel*

This paper develops Bernard Williams's suggestion that for philosophy to ignore its history is for it to assume that its history is vindictory. The paper aims to offer a fruitful line of inquiry into the question whether philosophy has a vindictory history by providing a map of possible answers to it. It first distinguishes three types of history: the history of discovery, the history of progress, and the history of change. It then suggests that much of philosophy lacks a vindictory history, for reasons that reflect philosophy's character as a humanistic discipline. On this basis, the paper reconstructs Williams's conception of what it means for philosophy to engage with its own history. The paper concludes that it is a mistake to think that a vindictory history is what we would really like to have, and that in fact, the resulting picture gives philosophy several reasons to engage with its own history.

### Introduction

THE American philosopher Gilbert Harman displayed a notice on his office door which read: "History of Philosophy: Just Say No!" "Just Say No!" was the Reagan administration's slogan for the war on drugs, so Harman in effect likened the history of philosophy to a recreational drug; but, as he later explained, he also wanted to encourage the thought that "the history of philosophy tends not to be useful to students of philosophy," just as it is "not particularly helpful to students of physics, chemistry, or biology to study the history of physics, chemistry, or biology."<sup>1</sup> On this view, the pursuit of philosophy has no more to gain from knowledge of its history than the pursuit of science from knowledge of its history.

In response to Harman, I want to develop a brief but suggestive remark of Bernard Williams's, to the effect that in order to find out whether philosophy can ignore its history, we need to look at its history. To put it less paradoxically: whether a field of knowledge can ignore its history or not is determined by the kind of history it has. One necessary condition for a field to be justified in ignoring its history—i.e. to be justified in conducting systematic debates without regard to past debates that are more than a few decades old—is that the field must have a history that is *vindictory*. To assume that philosophy can ignore its history is

<sup>1</sup> Harman, quoted in Tom Sorell: *On Saying No to History of Philosophy*, in: *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 43–60, 44.

therefore to assume that philosophy has such a vindicatory history. But for much of philosophy, Williams thinks, this is an “enormous and implausible assumption.”<sup>2</sup>

My aim in this paper is to offer a fruitful line of inquiry into the question whether philosophy has a vindicatory history. I begin by providing a map of possible answers to this question. A field or a subfield of inquiry can, I argue, possess any one of three different types of history, which I label the history of discovery (§1), the history of progress (§2), and the history of change (§3). I offer reasons to think that much of philosophy lacks a vindicatory history, and for some of the same reasons that lead Williams to conceive of philosophy as a humanistic discipline. I then argue that it is a mistake to think that a vindicatory history is what we would really like to have (§4). Indeed, after reconstructing Williams’s conception of how philosophy should engage with its own history (§5), I argue that not being vindicatory lends the history of philosophy a potential it would not otherwise have (§6).

## 1. History of Discovery

The first type of history I want to characterise is what I shall call the *history of discovery*. Suppose we wanted to know of a given field of inquiry how we came by our current outlook in this field. The best explanation of how we came by this outlook would have to include an account of *why* we came to think in the terms articulating the outlook. Of course we might have picked up these concepts at school, or use them because everyone else does, but *why*, ultimately, did we come to think in these terms? An answer to this question has the form of a *history of discovery* if what gave us reason to use a particular concept *at the same time* gives us reason to think that some of our beliefs involving this concept are *true*. For example, the best explanation of why we came to think in terms of electrons can itself deploy the concept of electron—for instance, by presenting us as being, via various measurement devices, suitably sensitive to the presence of electrons—and thereby directly vindicates some of our beliefs about electrons, such as the belief that electrons exist. A history of discovery thus conforms to the following schema:

Ultimately, we came to use the concept of *x* because we are suitably sensitive to truths about *x*.

Contrast this with the case of ethical beliefs: the best explanation of why we came to think in terms of, say, cruelty will have to appeal to history, psychology, and

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Williams: *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, in: *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006) 180–99, 192.

anthropology to explain why we use this rather than some rival concept, and none of this will do much to vindicate our beliefs about cruelty. It is here, at the level of how we *explain* our thinking in certain terms, that Williams thought the interesting differences between science and ethics were to be found.

Where the history of our concepts takes the form of a history of discovery, it is vindicatory, because it represents us as having got something right. This in turn has implications for how we should expect the rest of history to have run. If our beliefs are connected to how the world actually is in the way in which a history of discovery represents them as being connected, this gives us a *prima facie* reason to expect anyone, at any time, to have converged on similar beliefs. If history belies this, we need to ask *why it is* that in earlier times people did not hold similar beliefs. We need a “theory of error.” In the case of beliefs about electrons, we have a theory of error. The same facts about electrons that explain why we came to hold certain beliefs about them also explain why these facts would have remained inaccessible to any insufficiently technologically advanced society.

On Williams’s view, the case of our beliefs about electrons generalises to much of the scientific outlook. Much of science can claim a history that is vindicatory because it takes the form of a history of discovery, and because it is coupled with a suitable theory of error. In good part, this is what licenses science’s insouciance towards its own history.

Can we think of philosophy along similar lines? It has, of course, been tried. An example is the intuitionist approach to moral epistemology advocated by G.E. Moore, W.D. Ross, and H.A. Prichard. They thought of intuitions as intuitions *of* something, as a form of discovery. This led them to ignore history and to try to ground their outlook in their intuitions. But this ahistorical approach comes to have implications for how we would expect history to have run. In its most primitive form, the thought that intuitions enable a form of discovery generates the expectation that different generations will converge on similar outlooks. Yet this, most obviously in ethics and political philosophy, is not the history we know. We therefore need a theory of error for these cases. But the problem is that we cannot give one in philosophy the way we can in physics. Why did the Greeks not figure out the workings of electrons? Because they lacked the technology. But why did they not figure out human rights? Here it seems that knowledge of history, together with the lack of a theory of error, gives us reason to deny an epistemically substantive interpretation of intuitions.

## 2. History of Progress

I turn now to the second way in which history can be vindicatory, namely by being a *history of progress*. The distinction between the history of discovery and the history of progress is not one which Williams explicitly draws, but it is implicit in his remarks on the history of discovery. One condition for a history to be a history of discovery, Williams writes, is that

the later theory, or (more generally) outlook, makes sense of itself, and of the earlier outlook, and of the transition from the earlier to the later, in such terms that both parties (the holders of the earlier outlook, and the holders of the later) have reason to recognize the transition as an improvement.<sup>3,4</sup>

This condition is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a history to be a history of discovery and actually captures a broader kind of vindicatory history, which is what I shall call a *history of progress*. The history of an outlook will be a history of progress to the extent that it fulfils the following condition: each transition from an earlier outlook to a later one is such that it can, in principle, be recognised from both perspectives as a rational transition. Here the best explanation of how we came by our outlook concerning  $x$  need not make reference to  $x$  in order to be vindicatory. There is a shared conception, at each stage of development, of what the arguments are about, which allows our outlook to emerge as having *won an argument*. This presupposes shared standards and forms of argument, a common conception of what counts as a reason for what.

Now any history of discovery will also be a history of progress, but not *vice versa*. The latter category is wider. In both types of history, there will be crises, but when the history is one of discovery, the crises will primarily be crises of *explanation*: even against the background of widespread agreement on what would count as an explanation, certain observations will constitute anomalies resisting explanation within the prevalent theory, thus precipitating the kinds of crises Thomas Kuhn has described.<sup>5</sup> When the history is not one of discovery, by contrast, the crises will primarily be crises of *confidence* or *legitimation*: the prevailing legitimations of authority will cease to be convincing—perhaps because they

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Williams: *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, op. cit., 189.

<sup>4</sup> This leaves it open whether the relation in question is supposed to be transitive: if the holders of outlook A and the holders of outlook B recognise the transition from A to B as a rational transition, and if the holders of outlook B and the holders of outlook C recognise the transition from B to C as a rational transition, must the holders of outlook A and the holders of outlook C also recognise the transition from A to C as a rational transition? As far as I can see, Williams does not answer this question, although his talk of progress certainly encourages answering it in the affirmative.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Kuhn: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

come to seem flawed, or, more fundamentally, because those towards whom the authority is to be legitimated lose confidence in the concepts in terms of which the legitimation is articulated. An example is the loss of confidence, signalled by the work of Grotius, Hobbes, and Pufendorf, in the legitimation of political authority in terms of divine authority.<sup>6</sup> These thinkers sought a new basis of legitimation in consent. The history of such transitions to new bases of legitimation will then be a history of progress only if the transition from one basis of legitimation to the next is a rational one, which in turn presupposes continuity at the level of what counts as a rational transition. Williams reads Thomas Nagel, for instance, as maintaining that liberalism has such a history of progress without discovery, because Nagel takes liberalism to be grounded in universal reason. “To reason,” Nagel writes, “is to think systematically in ways that anyone looking over my shoulder ought to be able to recognize as correct.”<sup>7</sup> To which Williams’s reply is: “*Anyone?* So I am reasoning, along with Nagel, in a liberal way, and Louis XIV is looking over our shoulder. He will not recognize our thoughts as correct. Ought he to?”<sup>8</sup> If we assent to this, we condemn most of the people that ever lived to wrongness; but we also once again incur the obligation to provide a theory of error, an account of why Louis XIV failed to be responsive to universal reason. Needless to say, Williams does not think that such an account is forthcoming.

### 3. History of Change

We come now to the third type of history. For Williams, much of our philosophical outlook can neither lay claim to a history of discovery nor to a history of progress. Though certain ideas won out, they did not win *an argument*, because their history is the history of the very forms and standards of arguments which can be offered in their support. For liberalism to have won an argument, proponents of the *ancien régime* like Louis XIV would have had to share with early liberals a conception of what the argument was *about*. There would have had to be a *common aim* in light of which liberal ideas appeared as an *advance* upon their predecessors. But on Williams’s view, the historical changes involved were simply too radical for such common aims to be available. And if liberalism failed to win an argument, then its history is not vindicatory. It consists merely in what we may call a *history of change*. We may of course still say that earlier outlooks were wrong, but, as

<sup>6</sup> Jerome B. Schneewind: *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Nagel: *The Last Word* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Williams: *The Last Word*, by Thomas Nagel, in: *Essays and Reviews 1959–2002*, ed. by Michael Woods (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) 371–87, 385.

Williams remarks, “the content of this is likely to be pretty thin: it conveys only the message that the earlier outlook fails by arguments the point of which is that such outlooks should fail by them.”<sup>9</sup>

While Williams focuses on ethics and political philosophy in his discussion of non-vindictory histories, he suggests that his considerations go wider. One might think that they apply, for instance, to parts of the philosophy of mind, such as the shift from an Aristotelian conception of the mind to a Cartesian conception of it.<sup>10</sup> But such non-vindictory histories—histories involving changes too radical for there to be common measures by which the transitions could be recognised as rational ones—can be identified even where philosophy is at its most general. A proper argument to this effect would require a book-length treatment which Williams does not provide, but Adrian W. Moore’s *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics* offers a proposal for what a Williams-inspired view of the history of philosophy beyond ethics and politics philosophy might look like. By “metaphysics,” Moore does not mean philosophy as an extension of science, a kind of high-level physics, but philosophy as “the most general attempt to make sense of things.”<sup>11</sup> We need not accept this as a characterisation of metaphysics; the point here is only that philosophy’s history can be and has been construed as a history of change even beyond ethics and political philosophy. From Descartes to Dummett and Deleuze, Moore identifies various incommensurable ways of sense-making, emphasising that while “making sense” is a matter of *being* intelligible, “making sense of” something is a matter of *rendering* it intelligible. Moore intends the associations of creativity to be taken seriously here, for he takes philosophers to be in the business of *devising* ways of sense-making, of *fashioning* concepts that make sense of things. The other point he emphasises is that they should make sense of things *to us*. It is sense-making *from a human point of view*, and it is in the service of human concerns and purposes that candidate concepts for sense-making must prove their worth.

In highlighting the double grounding of philosophical sense-making in socio-historically situated human agents—it is sense-making *by* them and *for* them—Moore makes explicit what Williams saw as contributing to the *humanistic* character not just of ethics, but of philosophy more widely. Williams characterises philosophy as a humanistic discipline in good part because, in contrast to science, much of philosophy does not aim at descriptions of the world as it is anyway,

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Williams: *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, op. cit., 191.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor: *Philosophy and Its History*, in: *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 17–30.

<sup>11</sup> Adrian W. Moore: *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 1.

in terms that are maximally perspective-independent. It aims at more local descriptions of the world as we experience it, in terms that are more context-bound than those of science, which is to say more closely tied up with culturally and historically idiosyncratic practices and norms.<sup>12</sup> On this view, the most helpful way of making philosophical sense of things is unlikely to be the one which tries to draw as little as possible on the conceptual resources that are specific to our own historical and cultural situation. Rather, it will draw in various ways on the concepts and forms of argument that make the most sense to us now.

But precisely for this reason, which is one of the reasons why Williams proposes to understand philosophy as a humanistic discipline, much of the history of philosophy is unlikely to be a history of discovery or of progress. Some of its history has consisted in the restoration and protection of extant ways of sense-making; some of it in the argumentative extension and amelioration of these ways of sense-making; yet it has also consisted, to a considerable extent, in radical breaks with previous ways of sense-making. These enabled us to make radically new sense of things by introducing new concepts by which to live, new questions to ask, and new ways of answering them. And it is precisely this novelty which bars these concepts from counting, by some common measure, as advancements over their predecessors. It should thus come as no surprise if parts of our philosophical outlook lack a vindicatory history and are, in this sense, contingent.

#### 4. Confidence Despite Contingency

Is this contingency a problem? When all we have is a mere history of change, then understanding the history of our outlook may seem to pose a threat to our confidence in it. Confidence is what sustains and binds us to concepts, ways of thinking and systems of reasoning. This confidence in our concepts is evinced in our practices, in the air of indubitability with which we put them to use and accept the reasons that guide and flow from the application of those concepts. But even where the reasons for applying a given concept and the reasons yielded by applying it are clear enough—the reasons for categorising Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as *blasphemous*, say, and the consequences this has according to the laws of Wilde's day—we can also raise a more basic question—as Wilde in effect did—namely *why* we should think in terms of blasphemy *at all*.<sup>13</sup> Where reasons for doing this give out, whether we go on living by the concept will be a matter of our confidence—confidence in that concept itself, but also in the other

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Williams: *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, op. cit., 184–87.

<sup>13</sup> Harford Montgomery Hyde: *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Dover, 1973) 107.



concepts, beliefs, and attitudes it is tied up with and from which it derives its point. If revealing the contingency of our outlook weakens this confidence, then knowledge of the history of philosophy will seem to pose a threat to the practice of it.

One answer to this threat is irony in the style of Richard Rorty.<sup>14</sup> Rorty's ironist acknowledges that our outlook is contingent, not just in the sense that we might have had a different outlook, but also in the sense that there is no conclusive argument for preferring the one we happen to have over possible alternatives. As a result, the ironist continues to live by the outlook in practice, but ceases fully to identify with it at a more reflective level—at this level, the ironist adopts a detached stance towards the outlook, considering it in no way superior to alternative outlooks.

Williams's own answer, by contrast, is that once one goes *far enough* in recognising contingency, the threat of a loss of confidence does not arise at all:

The supposed problem comes from the idea that a vindicatory history of our outlook is what we would really like to have, and the discovery that liberalism, in particular (but the same is true of any outlook), has the kind of contingent history that it does have is a disappointment, which leaves us with at best a second best. But, once again, why should we think that? Precisely because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, we can accept that this outlook is ours just because of the history that has made it ours; or, more precisely, has both made us, and made the outlook as something that is ours. We are no less contingently formed than the outlook is, and the formation is significantly the same. We and our outlook are not simply in the same place at the same time. If we really understand this, deeply understand it, we can be free of what is indeed another scientific illusion, that it is our job as rational agents to search for, or at least move as best we can towards, a system of political and ethical ideas which would be the best from an absolute point of view, a point of view that was free of contingent historical perspective.<sup>15</sup>

As I read this dense passage, the appearance that there is a problem derives from two ideas: first, that our outlook fails to have a vindicatory history; and second, that a vindicatory history is what we would really like to have. It is in holding on to this second idea that Rorty does not go far enough in recognising contingency. He remains committed to two assumptions which Williams rejects: (i) that we must strive for the ways of sense-making that are absolutely best; and (ii) that we must do so as characterless selves. Against these ideas, Williams insists that our task is *not* to find the concepts that are best from a point of view that is as free of contingent historical perspective as possible. Our task is to find the concepts, the ways of sense-making, that best make sense of the world *to us*; but what

<sup>14</sup> Richard Rorty: *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chs. 3 and 4.

<sup>15</sup> Bernard Williams: *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, op. cit., 193.



makes sense to us is in turn a function of *who we are* and of which concepts shape our concerns, both of which are largely a matter of contingent biographical and historical circumstance. Crucially, for Williams, these contingent influences are not a constraint to be overcome, but rather what enables our sense-making in the first place. The sense-making self cannot be separated from everything that it contingently is—it is not, in the first instance, *biased* by historical processes, but *constructed* by them.<sup>16</sup> There is no characterless self, and if there were, it would lack any basis for deciding between outlooks. Consequently, it is neither an objection to the concepts we start out from nor to those we end up with that they are contingent. The aim is not that our concepts should be ultimately and timelessly desirable, but that they should be *ours*, and that they should have a point *for us*. This is why revealing their contingency is not in itself subversive.<sup>17</sup>

It does not follow for Williams, therefore, that we should lose confidence in an outlook when it is found not to have a vindicatory history. On the contrary, the fact that an outlook does not have a vindicatory history can be a gain in various ways, because it bestows a potential upon philosophy's preoccupation with its own history that it would not otherwise possess. To understand how this can be so, it is helpful to form an idea of Williams's conception of how the history of philosophy should be done.

## 5. History of Philosophy Between Anachronism and Antiquarianism

Williams's conception of the history of philosophy comes out in his nuanced attitude to a remark attributed to Paul Grice, that we “should treat great but dead philosophers as we treat great and living philosophers, as having something to say to us.”<sup>18</sup> Williams suggests that it is right to emphasise that the history of philosophy should be made to speak for the living—that it should be, in some way, *in the service of life*, as Nietzsche put it.<sup>19</sup> Yet he also suggests that it would be wrong to assume “that what the dead have to say to us is the same sort of thing as the living have to say to us.”<sup>20</sup> A helpful way into Williams's conception of the

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Williams: *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 158–9.

<sup>17</sup> See Matthieu Queloz: *How Genealogies Can Avoid Genetic Fallacies and Continuity Failures* (manuscript).

<sup>18</sup> Grice, quoted in Bernard Williams: *An Essay on Collingwood*, in: *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, ed. by Myles Burnyeat (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 341–60, 344.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche: *History in the Service or Disservice of Life*, in: *Unmodern Observations*, ed. by William Arrowsmith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Williams: *An Essay on Collingwood*, op. cit., 344.

history of philosophy is to situate it on a spectrum ranging from anachronism at one end to antiquarianism at the other end.

On the one hand, Williams distances himself from what he perceives as the “triumphant anachronism” of some philosophers.<sup>21</sup> In a late essay entitled “Why Philosophy Needs History,”<sup>22</sup> he approvingly cites Nietzsche’s dictum that “lack of historical sense is the hereditary defect of philosophers.”<sup>23</sup> In Williams’s view, talk of a *hereditary* defect is legitimated by the fact that while Nietzsche wrote this in 1878, Gilbert Ryle still cheerily encouraged his students to treat something written by Plato as though it had come out in *Mind* last month.<sup>24</sup> This is anachronistic not because it puts past philosophy to use in present terms, but because it does so in a way that neglects or overlooks, to an unduly large extent, “the history that lies between that philosophy and the present day.”<sup>25</sup> History of philosophy in this style yields philosophy, but its fault lies in its tendency to yield *our* philosophy.

On the other hand, Williams also follows Nietzsche in criticising *antiquarianism*: the way of approaching the past which fails to relate it to the present at all by resting content with an uncritical, unquestioning attitude of reverence of the old *because* it is old. This antiquarian form of engagement with the past which gathers “any old facts, merely for their own sake,” can, as Williams notes in *Truth and Truthfulness*, “sustain an individual life, but in a larger scheme of things historical research will not make sense unless it is driven by some question, and ultimately by the prospect of some interpretation.”<sup>26</sup> Antiquarianism fails to tie inquiry into history back to our concerns as inquirers. A fuller discussion than we have room for here would elaborate on the relation of antiquarianism to Williams’s discussion of the “Platonic” misunderstandings of the virtue of accuracy, and more particularly of the ideal of personal disinterestedness.<sup>27</sup> Antiquarianism might be seen as

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Williams: Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy, in: *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, ed. by Myles Burnyeat (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006) 257–64, 258.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Williams: Why Philosophy Needs History, in: *Essays and Reviews 1959–2002*, ed. by Michael Woods (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) 405–12.

<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche: *Human, All Too Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) I, §2. The formulation is of course ironic, since historical sense is precisely what is required to recognise something as a *hereditary* defect (Nietzsche uses *Erbfehler* in the German original). In this sense, those most afflicted by the defect will be those least well-equipped to recognise it for what it is. However, Nietzsche’s own method in this work is not as historical as this quote suggests. See Matthieu Queloz: Nietzsche’s Pragmatic Genealogy of Justice, in: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, Early View (2017) 1–23.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Williams: *An Essay on Collingwood*, op. cit., 344.

<sup>25</sup> Bernard Williams: Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy, op. cit., 258.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Williams: *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) 146.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this. For a discussion of Williams’s genealogy of the virtues of truth, see Matthieu Queloz: *Williams’s Pragmatic Genealogy and Self-effacing Functionality* (manuscript).

such a Platonic misunderstanding insofar as it takes accuracy to demand that inquiry transcend human affairs altogether—that it be pure of any relation to our present-day concerns.

In between these two extremes of antiquarianism and anachronism, we can situate the *history of ideas* (which is closer to antiquarianism than it is to anachronism), and the *history of philosophy* (which is closer to anachronism than to antiquarianism). The history of ideas is characterised by Williams as having three features: (i) it primarily yields history; (ii) it has a synchronic focus on a philosopher's context and contemporaneous influences; and (iii) it aims to identify what a philosopher was *doing* in making an assertion in a particular historical situation.<sup>28</sup>

The history of philosophy, by contrast, is characterised by the following three features: (i) it primarily yields philosophy; it is no surprise that the history of history is a contribution to the discipline it gives the history of; but it is a remarkable fact that the same is true of philosophy: the history of philosophy (in contrast to the history of ideas) is also a contribution to the discipline it is the history of;<sup>29</sup> (ii) it has a more diachronic orientation, looking at past and future developments rather than the contemporaneous context; and (iii) it aims to relate a philosopher's ideas to present philosophical concerns and to identify their influence on subsequent history (which includes the influence they may have by being misunderstood).

Both the history of ideas and the history of philosophy, on Williams's conception, are meant to capture real mixtures of history and philosophy rather than to form part of the demonology of the discipline. This is not to deny, however, that they are partly incompatible mixtures. By exploring as far as possible the relations of past ideas to present concerns, one is partly debarred from fully doing justice to what they meant in their historical context. There comes a point at which one faces a necessary trade-off. Williams aptly compares the situation to that of the impressionist painter who, at some point, finds that one can only emphasise the surface effects of light at the expense of information about structure.<sup>30</sup>

Williams's ideal, then, is that the history of philosophy should be done philosophically, so that it yields *philosophy*, but not so anachronistically that it yields *our* philosophy.

<sup>28</sup> There are strong echoes of the view advocated by the "Cambridge School" of the history of ideas in this characterisation. See Quentin Skinner: *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*, in: *History and Theory* 8 (1969) 3–53.

<sup>29</sup> See Adrian W. Moore: *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, op. cit., 585–90.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Williams: *Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy*, op. cit., 257.

## 6. Why Philosophy Should Care About Its History

What is the upshot, if we combine this conception of the history of philosophy with the insight that much of philosophy's history may fail to be vindicatory?<sup>31</sup> We may accept Williams's view of the history of philosophy, and acknowledge that philosophy's history may well take the form of a history of progress or change rather than of a history of discovery, but why should we care when doing philosophy?

At the most general level, the answer is that in any field of philosophy, engaging with the history of our outlook and determining whether it has a history that is vindicatory affects our reflective attitude towards the outlook. We can distinguish three ways in which it does so.

First, it functions as a test of reflective stability: it can reveal us to be self-deceived about the outlook's history, or else strengthen our confidence in the outlook by showing that it is in fact stable under historical reflection. In the former case, learning about the history of our outlook can reveal us to be self-deceived, for instance, insofar as we mistake an outlook with a history of change for one with a history of progress or even of discovery. As we saw, Williams accuses Nagel of claiming authority for liberalism in terms of a history of progress where there is in fact only a history of change. To the extent that liberalism depends on having a history of progress, therefore, it will prove unstable under historical reflection.

In the latter case, learning about the history of our outlook leads us to find that it is stable under reflection. This can strengthen our confidence in our outlook by clearing it of suspicion. Here historical inquiry provides what we might call *negative* vindication. It *sounds out* our ideas, and finds that although they may be contingent, they are reflectively stable. This vindicates our outlook "in the sense that we can understand it and at the same time respect it, support it and live within it."<sup>32</sup> It also suggests that we can "urge it against alternative creeds whose own self-understandings (as divine revelations, for instance) are themselves not going to survive"<sup>33</sup> this level of historical scrutiny. For Williams, this is often not just all the vindication we can hope for, but all the vindication we need.

Second, whether we deceive ourselves about an outlook's history or not, the recognition that it does not have a vindicatory history makes a difference to our

<sup>31</sup> While this is a convenient way to put it, we should be wary of identifying the history of philosophy with philosophy's history. By "philosophy's history," I mean the development of philosophical thought through the ages, while by "the history of philosophy," I mean the activity of recovering and engaging with that thought and its development (this parallels Kant's distinction between *res gestae*, things done, and *rerum gestarum memoria*, the memory of things done).

<sup>32</sup> Bernard Williams: Why Philosophy Needs History, op. cit., 410.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

reflective attitude towards the outlook, and it does so in two ways. On the one hand, it changes how we think of the outlook's relation towards *alternative outlooks*. It makes a difference to what we are *doing* in saying that the earlier outlooks were wrong; absent a vindicatory history, we are not showing that our outlook is better by standards which could have been accepted by our historical opponents. Rather, our outlook will have been found to be, at its basis, rationally contingent. This is one reason why, in order to know what reflective attitude to take towards our own outlook, we need to turn to philosophy's history.

On the other hand, realising that our outlook does not have a vindicatory history changes how we think of the outlook *itself*. What initiates philosophical inquiry is at least in part the observation that various parts of our outlook seem contradictory or incoherent to us. The history of philosophy can help us understand why this is so—why, to take up again the example of liberalism, certain problems liberalism has with ideas of autonomy are only to be expected, because these ideas inherit enlightenment conceptions of the individual (such as that of a characterless, transcendental self). This can inform the way we then go about making philosophical sense of our outlook. Determining whether our outlook has a history that is vindicatory helps us to distinguish between merely apparent contradictions, which leave room for the hope that a sufficiently powerful analysis will allow us to resolve them, and irreducible contradictions, which do not. In this way, for instance, the history of philosophy can help us decide to what extent our ethical outlook should be expected to yield to the rigid demands of ethical theory.<sup>34</sup>

Third and finally, it is precisely when the history of our outlook is *not* vindicatory that the alternative outlooks unearthed by the history of philosophy acquire a disruptive potential they would not otherwise have. The peculiar power which the history of philosophy derives from the fact, whenever it is a fact, that philosophy's history is not vindicatory is, in Nietzsche's words (which Williams quotes approvingly), the power "to be untimely—that is, to act against the age, and by so doing to have an effect on the age, and, let us hope, to the benefit of a future age."<sup>35</sup> It becomes capable of challenging our preconceptions by enabling us to

<sup>34</sup> For instance because "once we regard the ethical life we now have as a genuinely historical and local structure, one that is peculiarly self-conscious about its own origins and potentialities, we shall have less temptation to assume that it is a satisfactorily functioning whole" (Bernard Williams: *Pluralism, Community and Left Wittgensteinianism*, in: *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. by Geoffrey Hawthorne (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005) 29–39, 36–37). And about *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams remarks: "A fundamental claim of the book is a methodological one, namely that if we're going to understand the puzzles that surround these concepts now—and there are many such problems in our present time—you can only understand them through historical knowledge of the concept" (Bernard Williams: *Truth and Truthfulness*, in: *What More Philosophers Think*, ed. by Julian Baggini and Jeremy Stangroom (London: Continuum, 2007) 130–46, 132).

<sup>35</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche: *History in the Service or Disservice of Life*, op. cit., 88. Williams quotes

gain an untimely perspective on our philosophical concerns, thus breeding a sense of familiarity about what seems strange and reviving a sense of strangeness about what seems familiar.<sup>36</sup> We saw that for Williams, the history of philosophy (as opposed to the history of ideas) was philosophy before it was history. This can sound as if he meant that the voices of bygone ages can be heard as contributing to contemporary debates. But this was precisely not the point. We cannot treat the history of philosophy as contemporary without losing the point of historical distance; the history of philosophy should yield *philosophy*, but it should not yield *our* philosophy. Just because earlier philosophers were not always trying to answer the same questions we are trying to answer, and just because things made sense to them that no longer make sense to us now, they are uniquely positioned to upset the *status quo*, to initiate the kind of disruption which incites creation. In this light, philosophy's lack of a vindicatory history will appear not as a loss, but as a gain.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have distinguished three types of history: the history of discovery, the history of progress, and the history of change. I have suggested that much of philosophy, for some of the same reasons that led Williams to call it a humanistic discipline, may lack a vindicatory history. But I have also argued that it is a mistake to think that a vindicatory history is what we would really like to have. Indeed, the fact that philosophy's history might not be vindicatory lends the history of philosophy an importance and a potential it would not otherwise have. The history of philosophy can function as a test of reflective stability, undermining or strengthening our confidence in our present philosophical outlook; it can function as a way of developing our reflective attitude towards our own outlook and its relation to alternative outlooks; and, especially when philosophy's history is not vindicatory, the history of philosophy can fulfil the function of challenging and disrupting our present outlook, upsetting the *status quo* and opening up new avenues of thought that would otherwise have remained invisible.<sup>37</sup>

---

this passage in: Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy, op. cit., 259, and in Bernard Williams: Shame and Necessity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 4.

<sup>36</sup> Bernard Williams: Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy, op. cit., 259, 260, 263.

<sup>37</sup> Thanks to Marcel van Ackeren, Adrian W. Moore, Markus Wild, Martin Kusch, Johannes Steizinger, Damian Cueni and an anonymous reviewer for helpful discussions and comments. Thanks also to the audience at the 2016 symposium of the Swiss Philosophical Society on philosophy and its history for which this paper was written.