

Reconstructivism not dead

The immediate occasion for this special issue was Christia Mercer's influential paper "The Contextualist Revolution in Early Modern Philosophy", which appeared in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (Mercer 2019). In her paper, Mercer clearly demarcates two methodologies of the history of early modern philosophy. On the one side she puts 'reconstructivists' (also called 'appropriationists' or 'collegialists'), who are not interested in the context of the text and what the author actually said; they merely want to pluck arguments from texts for their own aims and purposes. On the other side she puts contextualists, who aim at "getting things right" and articulate the authentic view of the author. She argues that there has been a silent contextualist revolution in the past decades, and the reconstructivist methodology has been abandoned.

The extent to which contextualism rules supreme in current historiography of early modern philosophy is evidenced, on Mercer's reading, by the debate between Michael Della Rocca and Daniel Garber. In his paper "Superheroes in the History of Philosophy: Spinoza, Super-rationalist", published in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (Garber 2015), Garber presents his critical comments on Della Rocca's book *Spinoza* (Della Rocca 2008). There, Garber argues for the first-order claim that Spinoza did not in fact adopt the version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason that Della Rocca ascribes to him. Further, in Garber's view, their interpretive difference concerning Spinoza's actual position results from a methodological disagreement: whereas Garber aims at grasping the meaning of Spinoza's claims in their context, paying close attention to the different and historically contingent motivations Spinoza had for making those claims, Della Rocca assumes that there is a single overarching agenda behind Spinoza's claims and interprets individual statements in light of that agenda.

In his reply "Interpreting Spinoza: the Real is the Rational", which appeared in the same issue of the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (Della Rocca 2015), Della Rocca argues that he has good textual reasons for attributing Spinoza his version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. In addition, he denies that there is a methodological difference between him and Garber, since they both aim

at reconstructing the actual views of Spinoza; they merely evaluate the possible routes by which one can arrive at those views differently. Whereas Garber cherishes the study of historically contingent debates, Della Rocca is keener to examine conceptual connections between different claims. Mercer in her paper effectively takes Della Rocca's side by formulating her "Getting Things Right Constraint". In her view, every historian of philosophy who strives to get things right and to get to the actual views of the author qualifies as a contextualist.

On the basis of this debate, as well as the intellectual atmosphere at different academic events, one can easily get the impression that 'reconstructivist' has become a pejorative label that everyone outright rejects. Mercer's examples of reconstructivist historians of philosophy are deceased (P. F. Strawson, Margaret J. Osler, Richard Watson, and Bernard Williams), anonymous (the fans of philosopher* mentioned by Lisa Downing), or authors whose more recent work followed a contextualist methodology (Jonathan Bennett). The reconstructivist camp seems to have turned into a shadowy group, largely extinct by now, not unlike the Death Eaters in the fictional universe of Harry Potter. There are some figures who previously belonged to this group, but they have since reformed their ways – or so it seems. Sometimes it is rumoured that certain people may still have secret allegiance to it, but no one dares to fly its banner openly.

We decided to create this special issue because we believe that reconstructivist methodology does not deserve this shadowy existence. Looking around, we still see a lot of fruitful reconstructivist research, even if not self-identified as such. Our aim is twofold. First, to present methodological reflections on what exactly reconstructivist methodology consists in, how it is different from contextualism, and how it can provide new perspectives and insights not available for contextualists. Second, to demonstrate, with the help of case studies, that reconstructivist research can produce relevant and exciting new results.

Martin Lenz's paper "Did Descartes Read Wittgenstein? A Dialogical Approach", which is a revised version of his inaugural lecture at Groningen University in 2017, combines both of these aims. (We should mention that it is a special honor for us to feature this text, since its original version, available online, prompted the discussion that led to our decision to create this special issue.) In this text, Lenz argues that contextualism and reconstructivism are not exclusive methodologies; rather, both have their own strengths and weaknesses, which can be overcome by a joint, dialogical approach. The reader of historical texts written in different eras is a person thinking partly in terms of historically and socially constructed concepts of other periods; therefore, one cannot but read one author with other authors in mind. Lenz's reading of Descartes' and Wittgenstein's notions of error exemplifies the way in which a combined method can deliver new insights in the history of philosophy.

Tad M. Schmaltz in his paper "Getting Things Right in the History of Philosophy" challenges a central tenet of Mercer's paper. Mercer has presented

her “Getting Things Right Constraint” as an ecumenical approach meant to encompass all relevant methodologies in current scholarship. Schmaltz shows that this ecumenical character is merely apparent. Mercer’s constraint rules out, e.g., the possibility that the historian of philosophy could understand a historical author ‘better’ than she did herself (i.e., that the author’s own interpretation has no clear priority), as well as the possibility that concepts unavailable to the author could be fruitfully invoked. Schmaltz advocates tolerance, recognizing a multiplicity of possible pragmatic grounds for interpretive approaches and doing away with a sharp distinction between contextualism and reconstructionism – the difference lying more in the weight attached to considerations intrinsic vs. extrinsic to the text studied.

Julie R. Klein in her paper “The Past and the Future of the Present” problematizes objects of contextualist study, the set of authors whose views we recognize as philosophy and deem worthy of study, as well as the contexts pertinent to studying their texts. She claims that the way in which history used to be constructed is characterized by Eurocentrism, patriarchy, and white domination. We need to think about philosophy in a new way, both by putting currently canonical works in new, broader contexts, and by focusing on new works that perhaps challenge our understanding of what counts as philosophy.

Oliver Istvan Toth in his paper “A Defense of Reconstructivism” argues that even if we accept that scholarship rejecting Mercer’s “Getting Things Right Constraint” has ceased to be pursued, there is still a live and interesting disagreement between reconstructivists and contextualists. He argues that these methodologies operate with different assumptions about the truth-maker of historical interpretation: contextualists hold that interpretations are made true by a concrete particular, the utterance that has meaning from its actual historical context, whereas reconstructivists hold that interpretations are made true by an abstract particular, the proposition that has inferential properties independently of the historical context of the utterance.

Andreas Blank in his paper “On Reconstructing Leibniz’s Metaphysics” demonstrates, using the example of Leibniz’s metaphysics, that some subjects cannot be studied using a purely contextualist methodology. He argues against Della Rocca’s claim in the paper “The Taming of Philosophy” (Della Rocca 2013) that relying on intuitions always puts a limitation on philosophy. Blank’s reading of Leibniz shows that intuitions about mental states can be used without “taming” philosophy, which is a reading that can only be achieved with the help of a reconstructivist rather than a contextualist methodology, abstracting away from immediate context.

Finally, Judit Szalai in her paper “Transparency and Broad Content in Descartes” argues for the application of the contemporary distinction between broad and narrow content in the interpretation of Descartes’ philosophy of mind and epistemology, illuminating several mystifying claims concerning self-knowl-

edge. While some of Descartes' statements have been recognized to call for a qualification of the transparency thesis (according to which everything in the mind is directly known to the subject), acknowledging difficulties of access (due to lack of attention/reflection, memory deficiency, or the dispositional character of certain ideas) leaves a number of cases open, which can be accounted for in terms of the injunction, named the "Narrow Content Rule" by the author, to view ideas merely as contents of the mind rather than in their relation to the world.

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Judit Szalai – Oliver Istvan Toth

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