

Nichols, Ryan. 'Why Should We Study the History of Philosophy?' *Metaphilosophy* 37 (2006): 34-52.

]

WHY IS THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY WORTH OUR STUDY?

ABSTRACT

Assume for the sake of argument that doing philosophy is intrinsically valuable, where 'doing philosophy' refers to the practice of forging arguments for and against the truth of theses in the domains of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, etc. The practice of the history of philosophy is devoted instead to discovering arguments for and against the truth of 'authorial' propositions, i.e. propositions that state the belief of some historical figure about a philosophical proposition. I explore arguments to think that doing history of philosophy is valuable, specifically, valuable in such a way that its value does not reduce to the value of doing philosophy. Most such arguments proffered by historians of philosophy fail egregiously, as I show. I then offer a proposal about what makes doing history of philosophy uniquely valuable, but it is one that many historians will not find agreeable.

There are scholars for whom the history of philosophy (ancient as well as modern) is itself their philosophy; the present prolegomena have not been written for them. They must wait until those who endeavor to draw from the wellsprings of reason itself have finished their business, and then it will be their turn to bring news of these events to the world. Failing that, in their opinion nothing can be said that has not already been said before...

—*Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Kant 1997, 5)

The value and purpose of doing research in the history of philosophy in the way professional historians of philosophy do it is rarely given serious philosophical analysis.

Why analytic philosophers tend to refrain from debating the value of the history of

philosophy I'm not sure but I hesitate to think it is because analytic philosophers are all agreed that doing history of philosophy is so obviously worthwhile as not to require any explicit justification. There are analytic philosophers who take aim at the practice of the history of philosophy but they do so under some cover.

The rarity of these challenges does not disguise the fact that the purpose and the value of historical philosophy are far from clear. This becomes obvious by considering the myriad defenses of it. There is discernible agreement amongst historians of philosophy neither about why what they do—we do—is worthwhile, nor about the goals of our method of philosophical inquiry. I want an answer to the question, 'Why is the history of philosophy worth our study—if in fact it is?' Proposed answers to something like this question are offered by renowned historians of philosophy, e.g. John Yolton, Richard Popkin, Daniel Garber, Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty. These thinkers have explicitly argued that there is value in studying the history of philosophy, and have implicitly claimed that it does not reduce to the value in studying contemporary analytic philosophy. Their reasons for this conclusion are notably diverse, some are mutually incompatible, and none are especially plausible. I will evaluate their arguments and then explain and provide a qualified defense of the claim that the value of studying the history of philosophy does not reduce to the value of contemporary analytic philosophy.

1. What's the Question?

Some analytic philosophers believe that doing history of philosophy is unimportant outright. In a piece published in the American Philosophical Association's own *Proceedings*

and Addresses Michael Scriven argues for the marginalization of history of philosophy courses in undergraduate curricula.

Some history will come in the back door of the problems courses—so be it. But don't be a slave to the fact that most of your faculty know a great deal about the history of philosophy and hence, (a) find it easy to teach, and (b) tend to rationalize its importance. Like the formal logic requirement, this is all-too-often a case of those who went through fraternity initiations (or marine boot camp) needing to justify the hardship—or their own idiosyncratic taste—by generalizing about its necessity. The test of a good major is that s/he does good philosophy, not good history of philosophy. Few great philosophers are noted for their work in the history of philosophy and many were deficient or disinterested in it. They were into the problems. Let it be at least a matter for investigation whether the history requirements are necessary; they certainly are a barrier. (Scriven 1988, 233)

Underlying Scriven's position is the opinion that studying the history of philosophy is not worthwhile. More charitably, studying historical philosophy is inferior to studying analytic philosophy.

Let's clarify his implicit point. The term 'the study of the history of philosophy' can refer (i) to the methods historians of philosophy use in their study, i.e. reading a text and reconstructing the reasoning it expresses; (ii) to the texts to which those methods are applied, e.g. Berkeley's *Principles*; or (iii) to the products of the application of those methods to the texts in question, e.g. a published paper about an aspect of Berkeley's

Principles is the fruit of what I am calling ‘doing the history of philosophy’. Scriven probably intends to take aim at (i)-(iii) by claiming that the methods, objects of study and research produced by analytic philosophers are superior on each count. To some extent the methods in each camp have much in common, so I will not interpret Scriven as focusing on (i). Scriven might take issue with the mere reading of historical figures because (he might continue) whatever issues those figures have discussed have been analyzed more accurately by contemporary analytic philosophers. His interest in preventing history of philosophy courses from being required courses in the major indicates that reading and understanding historical texts is not of any crucial importance. But I will assume he is wrong about this in what is to follow both for the sake of argument and because a strong *prima facie* case can be made for the value of spending at least some time reading and studying historical figures. Instead, I will interpret Scriven’s implicit attack as being directed at the research program of historical philosophy, i.e. at (iii). I am thus not interested in debating the value of historical methods in philosophy, or of reading historical figures. I want to examine the value of research conducted in the history of philosophy, i.e. the value of ‘doing’ the history of philosophy as we say.

There are several ways to determine whether the charge that it is not valuable sticks. One approach would be to determine whether some (or most) of the historical philosophy currently published by journals and presses is inferior to or unnecessary for contemporary analytic philosophy. But such a method would not mark a principled response to the dispute. The historian can recognize that some work produced in her field is inferior to analytic work but still maintain that some is necessary for or as valuable as—or more valuable than—some work in contemporary analytic philosophy. Instead I propose

to identify the aim of historical philosophy then evaluate whether the pursuit of this aim is worthwhile.

We will search for an answer to the question: 'Is the study of and writing about historical philosophical figures intrinsically worthwhile?' This contrasts with the following questions: 'Why is the history of philosophy worth studying for me?' and 'Are the views of a particular philosopher, for example, those of Plato, worth study?' Historical philosophy may be worth studying for me on purely instrumental grounds. Perhaps I relish the notion of impressing people I meet at cocktail parties by telling them I do history of philosophy. Likewise the study of some particular philosopher may be of instrumental value; perhaps I have ideological or religious reasons to study and publish on Plato.¹ It is difficult to say something positive about the type of value for which I intend to test without entering into a dispute about theories of value. I will sidestep this issue and simply say that I am interested in determining whether historical philosophy is valuable in such a way that its value reduces neither to the value of these sorts of purely instrumental goods, nor to the value of studying contemporary analytic philosophy. Doing the history of philosophy has a practical, instrumental value for contemporary analytic and continental philosophy. Contemporary philosophy in most forms would not be possible without the production of good translations of historical texts. Even if as a contemporary philosopher one doesn't engage in historical interpretation, it is prudent that he or she understand arguments that have their origins in historical figures. This understanding would be compromised without good

¹ Frankly, when we're not being stuffy about it, the reason most of us are in philosophy has little to do with its intrinsic value and much more to do with the fact that it is fun (or so I hope). But this fact does not diminish the philosophical interest of the present inquiry.

translations. But my hunch is that the historian of philosophy will not rest content merely as a service worker of sorts.²

Clearly history of philosophy is useful in that sense. It is also instrumentally valuable in another important way. Developing analytical thinking skills, e.g. the ability to reconstruct a deductive argument, is valuable. So is developing the ability to read a complicated philosophical text and understand the author's train of thought. Here again, however, an historian of philosophy will probably not be content to leave the story here.

² Richard Popkin argues that the labor of historians is necessary for contemporary philosophy in a practical sense. Popkin argues that without historians of philosophy, contemporary philosophers would not be able fully to appraise the philosophical systems of these figures. He says, "For anyone who wants to understand [Wittgenstein] there are hosts of historical and philological problems. The most rudimentary are linguistic. How can one tell if one is reading what Wittgenstein wrote unless one knows German, knows something about the peculiarities of Viennese German, etc.?" (Popkin 1985, 628). In light of these considerations Popkin asks, "can one say that history of philosophy is unneeded, or irrelevant? ... If not, then the historian plays a role ... in making the *doing of philosophy* at any given time and place in history, possible" (631). So history of philosophy is necessary in a pragmatic sense.

If there are philosophers who refuse to see the need for the labor Popkin describes, they are arrogantly incorrect. Playing to the home crowd Popkin motivates his project by appeal to "dreary discussions" he's had the misfortune of being party to during the "thirty-nine and one-half years that [he has] been teaching in Philosophy departments" (626). He thus fails to pin such a view on anyone, and it is no wonder why. By anecdotally attacking a straw man he inadvertently fuels Scriven's fire.

Historians rightly feel as though they are more central to the task of discovering philosophical insights than this allows.

For the sake of the argument to follow I presuppose that doing contemporary analytic philosophy, or what is sometimes more properly called ‘problem-solving’, is intrinsically worthwhile. I also assume that what we call analytic philosophy or problem-solving philosophy is roughly the same practice in which Descartes, Leibniz and Hume were engaged. These figures, and those who today take up their banner, are by no means agreed on the precise aim of their work. Some contend that analytic philosophy is essentially connected with linguistic analysis. By clarifying the meanings of terms we can solve, or better, dissolve, philosophical problems. Others, including Russell, argue that the method of analytic philosophy is nothing other than the scientific method supplemented with a priori reasoning. Members of this group believe the key to characterizing analytic philosophy lies in describing its domain and not its method. Yet others will seek to put the goals of analytic philosophy in more naturalistic form, having to do with the development of an understanding of the physical world of which, they add, our minds are a part. Some will put the goal in starkly opposed terms to say that we aim at understanding God and his creation, both material and immaterial. Despite these sharp differences, we can best characterize analytic philosophy as it is practiced in these terms: to use arguments—deductive, inductive, abductive—to determine the truth of philosophical propositions and solve philosophical problems. A ‘philosophical’ proposition is a proposition in one or more theories in metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics (broadly construed), or in one or more theories about other theories in the domains of physics, politics, psychology, economics, linguistics, cognitive science, etc.

Philosophical propositions contrast with what I call ‘authorial’ propositions, whose content is primarily about whether someone affirmed something, e.g. ‘David Hume believes, in the *Treatise*, that we cannot have any non-inferential perceptual knowledge.’ Doing history of philosophy is the process by which we arrive at knowledge of the truth-value of authorial propositions in which the author is alleged to affirm or deny some philosophical proposition. While my belief that analytic philosophy is intrinsically valuable is widely shared within the realm of Anglo-American philosophy, learning the truth-values of authorial propositions is generally not assumed to be intrinsically valuable. At least, it is not obvious to me that learning the truth-values of authorial propositions is intrinsically valuable. Far from successfully showing that historical philosophy is intrinsically valuable, its defenders haven’t even shown that it is instrumentally valuable for contemporary analytic philosophy.

To begin we will analyze some views voiced by historians of philosophy about the aim, and corresponding value, of historical philosophy.

2. Psychologically Necessary

Despite his helpful distinction between four genres of the history of philosophy, what Richard Rorty has to say about the aim of what he calls “rational reconstruction” history of philosophy is diffuse. He explains that the “main reason” we rationally reconstruct the theories of our predecessors “is that it helps us to recognize that there have been different forms of intellectual life than ours” (Rorty 1984, 51). We study the history of philosophy “in order to assure ourselves that there has been rational progress” (51). Just why Rorty thinks *insuring that there has been* rational progress in the history of philosophy

is a laudable goal, as opposed to *making* rational progress in the study of philosophy, he doesn't say. He hints at an answer when remarking that "we cannot get along without heroes. We need mountain peaks to look up towards. We need to tell ourselves detailed stories about the mighty dead in order to make our hopes of surpassing them concrete" (73). The doing of history of philosophy is allegedly psychologically necessary for the success of contemporary philosophy.

However, first, whatever the details of this proposal may be—to give us heroes, to educate us about other forms of life, or to remind us of our progress—Rorty explains neither why doing the history of philosophy secures these goals nor why meeting these goals is necessary for contemporary philosophy. I can recognize other forms of intellectual life by simpler methods: simply reading (not reconstructing) the theories of historical philosophers, or talking with people whose views I do not share. Second, one needn't provide a detailed reconstruction of a historical philosopher's position in order to hope to surpass it (let alone to surpass it). A rudimentary understanding of Descartes' *Meditations* and the circular reasoning in contains, say, will make fairly clear our ability to improve upon grounding an epistemology. Rationally reconstructing irredeemably bad philosophical theories will only generate false 'hope'. Claiming the study of history of philosophy fulfills these psychological needs is obscure and, even if true, it would not imply that what passes for history of philosophy now is worthwhile in any but a purely instrumental sense.

3. Morally Obligatory

John Yolton offers a somewhat similar discussion of the purpose of doing the history of philosophy. He claims that it can be inspirational to contemporary analytic philosophy. He cites examples of the way in which current thinkers have drawn on historical figures for insights they then adapt for implementation in their own theories, e.g. the way Chomsky developed his account of innateness via study of Descartes (Yolton 1986, 17). If this is the central purpose of studying the history of philosophy then it is strictly speaking unnecessary for contemporary analytic philosophy and of dubious intrinsic interest. For this amounts to the suggestion that the history of philosophy is useful in what we might call the ‘phase of discovery’ of contemporary philosophy. Yolton leaves unclear the role of the professional, card-carrying historian of philosophy—one who attempts to reconstruct a figure’s theories in full detail. By scavenging from Descartes Chomsky is not doing history of philosophy in the same sense as those publishing in history of philosophy journals. So this suggestion of Yolton’s, were it correct, would leave the bulk of historical work unmotivated.

More interesting is another suggestion that Yolton raises, which invokes moral reasons. Yolton urges that doing the history of philosophy is morally necessary if one wants to make claims about the beliefs of historical philosophers. He says, “anyone claiming to cite or use a doctrine of Locke, Berkeley, or Hume (or any other author, past or present) has an obligation to get it right. The label ‘Lockean’ or ‘Cartesian’ should not be used as a way of avoiding a firsthand check on the texts of those authors.” The “reliance on hand-me-down interpretations, stereotypes embedded in our courses” is morally impermissible (18). He follows this with some strenuous words about the misuse of historical figures in

contemporary philosophy. When contemporary philosophers make erroneous attributions to historical figures Yolton effectively accuses them of libel.

This exhibits an undue litigiousness toward our appropriation of our own history. It is far from obvious why tracking down authoritative texts for each attribution to Locke—let alone Anaximander—is morally obligatory. We should allow ample room for contemporary philosophers to maneuver through the landscape of ideas unencumbered with such obligations. (Ironically the two purposes he sets for the history of philosophy are directly at odds for this reason.) Consider one of the most famous historical misinterpretations, which is brought to us Peter Strawson. In *Individuals* he directs a lengthy attack at someone he says he has named ‘Leibniz’ (Strawson 1963, 117). He is self-conscious about the fact that he doesn’t claim to represent the historical Leibniz with that name, even though he continues to use it. Were Strawson to have met Yolton’s obligations, *Individuals* would have been a different—and much worse—book if, that is, it had ever seen the light of day.

Yolton needn’t worry about ‘getting historical figures right’ for our community has a built-in mechanism to determine whether, in this case, Strawson’s ‘Leibniz’ closely resembles Leibniz’s actual thought. Historians of philosophy will fill such gaps. If Yolton’s aims mark a complete account of the purpose of research in the history philosophy then, far from chiding Strawson, Ryle and others for historical carelessness, one might think we historians owe them a debt of gratitude for keeping us in business.

Furthermore, an ‘ought-implies-can’ principle saps Yolton’s suggestion of its promise. Fulfilling our moral obligations by accurately attributing to historical figures only views that they endorsed is sometimes impossible and often nearly impossible. For

example, deciding which of the several positions Locke discusses about the distinction between types of qualities is his is underdetermined by the textual and historical evidence. One need only read the latest books and papers proposing to explain Locke's one true distinction in order to realize that, after decades of careful study and full access to manuscripts and correspondence, some of the brightest minds in academic philosophy disagree widely about this and other key aspects of the Lockean system.

Even if Yolton is correct that the moral obligation he describes is real, this alone does not sustain the discipline of the history of philosophy as we know it. Yolton suggests that, were one to write about or refer to Locke, one would have an obligation to interpret him accurately. But clearly philosophers have no obligation to write about or refer to Locke in the first place. Were Yolton right, one would merely have a negative obligation, viz. not to attribute inaccurately anything to Locke and company. Despite his first suggestion, Yolton's second proposal promotes book-wormish literary sleuthing, not rich, historically informed philosophical work. And as Richard Watson has said, showing that Ryle's Descartes is not the historical Descartes is as easy as shooting fish in a barrel (Watson 1993, 100). If the driving impetus behind the history of philosophy is meeting obligations of attribution—and detecting when others fail to do so—history of philosophy loses its philosophical value.

4. Conceptually Necessary

According to Charles Taylor,

in a given society at a given time, the dominant interpretations and practices may be so linked with a given model that this is, as it were, constantly projected for the members as the way things obviously are. I think this is the case—both directly, and via its connection with influential modern understandings of the individual and his freedom and dignity—with the epistemological model. But if this is so then freeing oneself from the model cannot be done just by showing an alternative... . Freeing ourselves from the presumption of uniqueness requires uncovering the origins [of the dominant interpretation]. That is why philosophy is inescapably historical.

(Taylor 1984, 21)

From this passage one might think that Taylor means that studying the history of philosophy and rationally reconstructing the views of previous thinkers is not *necessary* for philosophy but merely *useful* for it. Taylor forestalls this interpretation. Using Descartes' epistemological model (on which knowledge requires certainty and we are in direct contact only with mental representations), Taylor asks, "But have I convinced you that one *must* do this by retrieving Descartes? Maybe I have given you reasons why this is a good way of doing things—but *the* way?" (20). It is "*the*" way because, says Taylor, only by studying Descartes will we understand what the foundational principles are which have contributed to the still dominant model for our analyses of knowledge and mind. Historical philosophy is *conceptually necessary* for the sake of contemporary philosophy.

Here again several problems are immediately apparent. First, even if Taylor's identification of the purpose of doing the history of philosophy is accurate, it would not bestow any importance on the bulk of research in the history of philosophy. If he's right the

only history of philosophy that is purposeful is that devoted to those figures who have contributed to the founding of what pass for contemporary dominant paradigms.³ Consider a historical philosopher like Thomas Reid, who vigorously *opposed* the model for knowledge and perception advocated by Descartes. If research on his theories is worthwhile, its value cannot be accounted for by Taylor's analysis. Of course Taylor does not claim that the conceptual necessity he describes is the *only* purpose for studying the history of philosophy, but it is allegedly the most important. It follows that Taylor's analysis of the purpose of history of philosophy is quite incomplete.

An irony following from Taylor's proposal contributes to its implausibility. Historians of philosophy rationally reconstruct the theories of historical figures in order to make them as consistent and plausible as texts allow. Given this it is no wonder that historians of philosophy often reinforce the allegiance of contemporary problem-solving philosophy to dominant paradigms rather than freeing problem-solving philosophy from them. Since he conceives of the purpose of doing the history of philosophy as freeing us of historical paradigms, presumably Taylor would not advocate an approach to the history of philosophy that seeks to make those paradigms as plausible as they can be made.

Furthermore it is not obvious that there is any truth to Taylor's claim that the study of the origins of certain paradigms is necessary for their overthrow. Consider the empirical sciences. Contemporary chemists, for example, do not need to know neither that the phlogiston theory originated with J. J. Becher late in the 17th century nor why it did so in order to refute it. Taylor believes the case is different in philosophy, that philosophy is

³ Even this is not quite right. Many of Descartes' letters and some of his treatises have no bearing on his formulation of what Taylor calls 'the epistemological model.'

“essentially historical.” Clearly there is some truth to claims about the essential relationship of philosophy to its history; the same cannot be said for chemistry. Despite this, such claims, once suitably clarified, seem to be overrated. Many of the best contemporary analytic philosophers have not made detailed historical studies of the views they oppose (or for that matter, any historical studies at all), and some, as we have witnessed, express a thinly veiled contempt for such projects. Taylor’s proposal is undercut by the vast amount of philosophical diversity and progress present in contemporary discussion, discussion largely conducted independently of historical concerns.

Lastly, Taylor doesn’t consider that a certain dominant model might be *true*. If so, then by Taylor’s lights history of philosophy has no purpose worth pursuing. More exactly, if one of our supplementary goals in doing historical philosophy is to believe truths and avoid believing falsehoods, then in such a case we have no reason to do history of philosophy since *ex hypothesi* we have no philosophical reason to ‘overthrow’ a model that is true.⁴

⁴ Sellars claimed that the history of philosophy is necessary to contemporary philosophy because it provides contemporary philosophy with a *lingua franca*. This marks a plausible way to unpack vaunted claims about the ‘essentially historical’ nature of philosophy. I suspect he is correct; history of philosophy continuously sets the table for problem-solving philosophy. This, however, does not imply that studying history of philosophy the way it is often studied is instrumentally valuable to contemporary philosophy, let alone intrinsically valuable. In fact, once this common language is in place, one might argue that attempts by historians to rewrite the canon actually *jeopardize* what Sellars sees as one of the primary aims of the history of philosophy.

5. Helps Us Ask Questions

Daniel Garber argues that the primary purpose of doing the history of philosophy is to pose new philosophical questions (Garber 1988). Studying historical figures stimulates us to consider new problems and/or consider the same problems from new perspectives. Garber echoes Descartes' comment that studying the history of philosophy "is much the same as traveling. It is good to know something of the customs of various peoples, so that we may judge our own more soundly..."⁵ This may not bring us to philosophical truth but "it leads us," says Garber, "directly to something just as valuable: philosophical questions." He asserts that to meet this goal we must understand these figures "on *their own terms*," which requires "disinterested historical investigation" (36, 37).

Garber does not take himself to have shown that reconstructing the views of historical philosophers is necessary in order to discover new philosophical questions. He is best interpreted as claiming that, while doing history of philosophy is not necessary for posing philosophical questions, it is useful for that end. In the interests of charity we should interpret Garber as placing a quality-control constraint on such questions. Not all broadly philosophical questions are worth pursuing. The reason is this. After studying an obscure medieval author I might pose the question, 'Do all angels have only one pair of wings?' But this seems to have little intrinsic philosophical (or theological) importance.

I am somewhat skeptical that merely posing questions, not answering them, is intrinsically worthwhile. (I am at pains to stress that even questions like this potentially

⁵ Descartes 1985, 113-4; AT VI 6. Quoted at Garber 1988, 35.

have great instrumental value since answering them philosophically requires the development of a vital set of analytical reasoning skills.) But what is worse is the fact that most questions now posed by card-carrying historians of philosophy are of an inferior form than the above example. Rather than asking questions of a philosophical nature, historians ascertain the truth-values of authorial propositions like, 'Did the Polish philosopher Albertist Paulus de Worczyn (b. 1380) believe that all angels have only one pair of wings?' This magnifies worries about the importance of historical philosophy. I submit that such questions do not constitute intrinsically valuable philosophical questions. The burden is squarely on Garber to show that by answering such authorial questions one will be led to pose important philosophical questions.

In many cases (including, to be sure, in Garber's own historical work) historians of philosophy generate important philosophical questions through reconstructing past philosophers' theories. But I submit that much historical philosophy does not generate important new philosophical questions. In the *Discourse on Method* Descartes recognized this in his day and even goes so far as to imply that doing the history of philosophy may *inhibit* the creativity Garber thinks it encourages. He says,

[A]s soon as I was old enough to emerge from the control of my teachers, I entirely abandoned the study of letters. Resolving to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself or else in the great book of the world, I spent the rest of my youth traveling... . For it seemed to me that much more truth could be found in the reasonings which a man makes concerning matters that concern him than in those which some scholar makes in his study about speculative matters ...

[which] have no practical consequences and no importance for the scholar except that perhaps the further they are from common sense the more pride he will take in them, since he will have had to use so much more skill and ingenuity in trying to render them plausible. (Descartes 1985, 115; AT VI 9-10)⁶

An honest evaluation of the current state of the history of philosophy and of the derivative nature of much of the secondary literature may render a similar comment. Thankfully, I'm not alone in this conclusion. Margaret Wilson, a historian of philosophy of the first rank, concurs. She says, "It may be, indeed, that the very detail and professionalism of much work in the history of philosophy today...can tend to *discourage* "use" of historical figures by contemporary philosophers of certain conscientiousness, in developing their own positions" (Wilson 1992, 205).

6. History of Philosophy as a search for truth

⁶ Elsewhere (in a letter to Hogelande, August 1638) Descartes criticizes a doxographic history of philosophy text by saying, "I do not mean that one should neglect other people's discoveries when one encounters useful ones; but I do not think one should spend the greater part of one's time in collecting them. If a man were capable of finding the foundations of the sciences, he would be wrong to waste his life in finding scraps of knowledge hidden in the corners of libraries; and if he were no good for anything else but that, he would not be capable of choosing and ordering what he found" (Descartes 1991, 119; AT II 346-7).

We've analyzed several accounts of the aim and/or value of doing the history of philosophy given by a handful of prominent historians of philosophy working today. On the whole this set of accounts is a disappointing bunch. I seek to improve upon these accounts by identifying what I take to be the central purpose of studying the history of philosophy, namely searching for philosophical truth through a critical analysis of arguments. I believe that determining the truth-values of authorial propositions should be the penultimate aim of doing the history of philosophy. The central aim of doing history of philosophy is the same as the aim in doing philosophy (as I described it above). If so, then some analytic philosophers will obviously retort that doing the history of philosophy as a means to discover philosophical truth has a number of rather obvious disadvantages when compared to doing philosophy simpliciter. In other words, achieving this shared goal is more efficiently accomplished without taking as a supplementary aim determining the truth-values of authorial propositions. While I don't deny this, I do want to stress that doing history of philosophy also possesses certain *advantages* compared with the method adopted in an analytic, problem-solving context.

Why think that the primary purpose of studying the history of philosophy is to determine the truth-values of philosophical propositions through an analysis of arguments? First, I take it that there is a key difference between a historian, or historian of ideas, working on Leibniz and a historian of philosophy working on Leibniz. The historian of ideas will be interested primarily in understanding what Leibniz thought and how he came to think what he thought. The philosopher will also be interested in those things, but she has a further goal. The philosopher also attempts to determine how Leibniz responds, or might respond, to objections to his theories circulating in his milieu. This is done in the

service of making Leibniz's system of philosophy as coherent as charity will allow. The philosopher is not merely a doxographer.

If the historian of philosophy is not merely a doxographer, then how best can we characterize her goals? Her concern with understanding precisely what Leibniz means by what he writes, and her attempt to respond to objections Leibniz faced, or could face, indicate that her pursuits are guided by a concern for determining the truth-values of philosophical propositions. Of course, 'that Leibniz believed X' is an authorial proposition with which the historical philosopher will also be concerned. Rather than being concerned exclusively with whether Leibniz endorsed the version of the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles attributed to him by Strawson, the historian of philosophy also wants to know whether Leibniz's texts support Strawson's attributions, whether Strawson's arguments against Leibniz succeed, and whether Leibniz can respond to such objections using resources contained within his corpus.⁷ The historian attempts to clarify various premises and principles, and adjudicate upon their truth. So, what distinguishes the philosopher who studies Leibniz from an intellectual historian who studies Leibniz is that the philosopher takes as one of her aims assessing the soundness of Leibniz's theories. This is a prescriptive, not descriptive, characterization of historical philosophy.

What distinguishes historical philosophy from analytic philosophy is its method and a supplementary aim. Jonathan Bennett says, of historical works of philosophy, "What I primarily go to these texts for is illumination, insight into philosophical truth." The best way to discern and understand the philosophical truths an historical author has to impart

⁷ I've plugged this gap myself in Nichols 1999 by arguing that Leibniz evades Strawson's criticisms—and that Strawson can't escape his own trap.

is by attempting to determine what he means by what he said, as opposed to “forcing onto him thoughts that he didn’t have” (Bennett 1988, 67). If those we study are brilliant thinkers then achieving our supplementary aim of correctly reformulating their actual theories will assist us in discovering the truth-values of philosophical propositions. There is some debate whether Bennett always succeeds in meeting his supplementary goal of getting the author right or in taking that goal to heart in his historical work. However that may be his analysis of the purpose of doing history of philosophy is sound and one I endorse.

In addition to being considerably more simple and easy to understand, this proposal avoids the errors found in previous suggestions. On earlier proposals, the history of philosophy is primarily valuable insofar as it is instrumental for doing contemporary analytic philosophy. In contrast, if the history of philosophy itself shares its primary aim with analytic philosophy, then it is in principle as worthy of pursuit as analytic philosophy. Thus a number of objections to doing history of philosophy would apply *mutatis mutandis* to doing analytic, problem-solving philosophy.

I should now say something more tangible about what historical philosophy amounts to when done in accord with the two-fold aim I describe. To take an example from my own bailiwick let’s look briefly at the following philosophical problem plaguing direct realist theories of perception. A direct realist is one who claims that the immediate objects of perception are mind-independent bodies and their qualities. How the direct realist can best account for perceptual relativity is uncertain. Consider: the things I see diminish or increase in size relative to me. But tables and chairs do not diminish or increase in size relative to me. I cannot visually perceive tables and chairs directly. Direct realism is thus

false. Thomas Reid is the foremost historical defender of direct realism, so it stands to reason that turning to his work will bear fruit in evaluating this argument—if, that is, he is the brilliant philosopher some think he is. He posits what he calls ‘visible figures’ in his discussion of this problem, but then he pulls up short and asks, “To what category of beings does visible figure then belong? I can only, in answer, give some tokens, by which those who are better acquainted with the categories, may chance to find its place” (Reid 1997, 98).

Here good exegetical and philosophical history can be conducted in concert to understand one option a direct realist has to respond to this argument. By doing the history of philosophy—by articulating, then analyzing and evaluating, Reid’s resolution to this problem—we will discover one creative response to this problem. Reasoning that Reid was a brilliant philosopher, and also a direct realist of the sort described, leads us to explore the contemporary direct realist’s options via interpreting Reid as accurately as possible. This example nicely captures the value of historical philosophy for, on this particular point, contemporary analyses of visual perception have not caught up to Reid’s subtle treatment of perceptual relativity of vision. Reidian ‘visible figure’ is a relational property between eyes and objects. Since it is itself mind-independent, and since its geometrical features are proof-theoretically equivalent to the mind-independent objects of sight, it can save direct realism about vision (Nichols 2002). Taken in this way we are not beholden merely to identify the truth-values of authorial propositions and withhold critical and evaluative analysis of Reid.

7. Objections and Replies

I now wish to consider some objections to setting the aims of historical philosophy as I have. The first objections are stated by historians. After those I will tackle an objection from problem-solvers like Scriven. The first is voiced by Garber, who says, “the focus on philosophical *truth* distorts our *historical* understanding of the figure and his position” (Garber 1988, 30). In effect Garber thinks the two-fold purpose I’ve prescribed generates internal problems. If we are interested primarily in philosophical truth, then we will *ipso facto* misinterpret the views of these figures. Hence, the history of philosophy cannot seek both historical understanding and philosophical truth.

But there is less to this objection than meets the eye. Simply switching the primacy of the two-fold purpose of history of philosophy as Garber suggests—placing interpretive accuracy before concern with analysis—does not resolve the problem of ‘distortion’ to which he refers. Those who lie along the more conservative end of the methodological spectrum, i.e. those who think that historians of philosophy should be concerned primarily with restating the figure’s theories, *themselves* differ radically about key features of many historical theories. This holds of Locke, as I’ve mentioned, but the same can certainly be said of many others: there is great disarray in Leibniz circles about the status of his corporeal substances, and in Hume circles about the nature and scope of naturalism in the *Treatise*. These situations can be multiplied. In them interpretations of a single theory (about which there can be only one correct interpretation) diverge in such a way that the interpretations of several well-informed historians of philosophy must be in radical error. Hence, abiding by Garber’s dictum that we should be primarily concerned with ‘historical

understanding' does not guarantee we will successfully determine the truth-values of authorial propositions.

Furthermore, to say that the preoccupation with milking historical figures for philosophical truth in the way I suggest will skew our understanding of their work is not obvious and needs argument. Of course, if historical figures were themselves not concerned with arriving at theories that were true, then the aims I advocate would be misplaced. However, historical figures were concerned with creating theories that were true. By saying this I'm not assuming that the theories of truth employed by contemporary historians of philosophy are identical to those advocated by historical figures themselves—some figures aim at explanatory adequacy, for example—but the present point holds in spite of minor differences. This assumption, and its application in the form of the principle of charity, drives interpretations on both sides of this methodological divide.

A second objection is stated by Robert Sleight. He draws a distinction between “exegetical history” and “philosophical history.” The goal of exegetical history is properly to attribute theories to their authors and explain those theories. His objection—to philosophical history—is that its goals are not clear. On the one hand, it sometimes consists in utilizing doctrines associated with or endorsed by a historical figure to create a new theory. But often this “approach is nothing more than an exercise in *a priori* reasoning to no clearly defined end.” On the other hand, philosophical history can adopt a different strategy on which one discusses a topic merely “in the company” of historical figures. However, this approach “allows the author a front for probing philosophical problems, presenting arguments, even reaching conclusions, without being held to current standards of rigor”

(Sleigh 1990, 3). Either way Sleigh does not believe that philosophical history has clear goals. He makes an unquestionably important observation.

In response, simply because a practice's goals are not determinate does not imply that the practice is not valuable or intrinsically valuable. Indeed, the converse holds too: the clarity of the goal of exegetical history does not *ipso facto* bestow upon it any value. More importantly, I am uncertain whether Sleigh's distinction between types of history of philosophy is accurate. If exegetical history takes as its sole goal to determine the truth-values of authorial propositions, then it is not obviously of intrinsic value or of instrumental value to analytic philosophy. But I submit that this particular characterization of doing the history of philosophy can be improved. Suppose the primary goal of doing history of philosophy is identical to the primary goal of analytic philosophy—finding philosophical truths and avoiding philosophical falsehoods through analysis of arguments—and suppose this is achieved via the supplementary goal of getting the truth-values of authorial propositions right. If so, we can steer clear of Sleigh's worries about unclear goals while making historical philosophy intrinsically valuable.

An analytic philosopher may take issue with my proposal in a different way in a third objection, which I regard as more challenging than the previous two. She might argue that the central goal of discovering the truth-values of philosophical propositions can be more efficiently achieved through analytic philosophy alone. (Naturally in several areas one can't hope to do history of philosophy in order to find philosophical truth because those issues were not themselves discussed by past philosophers.) An enormous amount of work in historical philosophy is clearly not devoted to searching for truth. As we quoted Descartes earlier, interpretations of historical figures often have "no importance for the

scholar except that perhaps the further they are from common sense the more pride he will take in them.” But rather than attempt to exonerate historical philosophy from such a charge, I wish to embrace its consequence. If a condition for intrinsically valuable historical philosophy is that it contribute to the aim of discovering the truth-values of philosophical propositions, then that portion of historical philosophy that does not pursue this aim is not intrinsically valuable.

But this does not imply that there is no special reason to do historical philosophy. A distinctively valuable facet of the history of philosophy sets its pursuit of philosophical truth apart from the approach taken by analytic philosophers. I refer to the role that systematicity plays in the analysis of the theories of historical figures. I want to make an empirical generalization about a key difference in the way history of philosophy and analytic philosophy are practiced today. Typically analytic papers are narrowly focused and seek to respond to a single clearly stated philosophical problem. Historical papers typically constitute attempts to redress a philosophical problem on a historical thinker’s behalf in such a way that the solution on offer better conforms to the thinker’s theories than prior interpretations. Historical papers thus work under a constraint: any solution of a philosophical problem on behalf of P must cohere well within P’s system. (Suffice it to say that one proposition coheres with a set of propositions if it is consistent with such a set and it is made probable by or entailed by members of that set or, in turn, it entails or makes probable members in that set. Coherence is a quantitative property.) Analytic papers typically do not employ such constraints. Since the focus is on a discrete, isolated problem, ramifications of various solutions to such problems are not discussed or kept in mind as often as they are in historical philosophy.

Examples of these phenomena abound. Consider a practice of a few leading analytic philosophy journals of issuing challenges to readers to solve intellectual puzzles. I do not demean the value of those puzzles, but the intellectual virtue cultivated by such a practice is not philosophical wisdom. It is cleverness—primped and polished to be sure, but only cleverness. Analogously clever attempts at extricating a historical philosopher from problems are praised in history of philosophy but not when they come at the expense of forsaking the consistency of a figure's theories. Making various positions adopted within a single philosopher's system coherent encourages the historical philosopher to develop a philosophical farsightedness often (but certainly not always) lacking in analytic philosophy. Of course, there are analytic system builders—people who have written about a wide range of topics in different areas of philosophy (likewise, there are historians of philosophy not at all concerned with the interrelations between a figure's theories)—but these are exceptions to the rule.

One might argue that puzzle-solvers take as their goal seeking philosophical truth. I grant that the puzzle-solvers are after philosophical truth. But here we can make a distinction between philosophical propositions whose truth-value it is important to know and philosophical propositions whose truth-value it is not important to know. Earlier I referred to the claim about angels having wings as an example of a philosophical proposition that was not intrinsically important. It seems to me the contemporary analogs of such a medieval question are sometimes found in puzzle notices. Though I expect this point will make me an equal-opportunity gadfly to both historical and analytic philosophers, the two sorts of questions serve precisely the same purpose: to sharpen analytic thinking. Divorced from any greater concern with philosophical systematicity,

responses to such puzzles are sly abstractions whose importance rests primarily in the exercise and development of one's analytical tools. Their content is often beside the point.

In this paper I have attempted to identify explicitly the aims of historical philosophy in order to determine whether and in what way it is valuable. In an attempt to improve on prior proposals I argued that historical philosophy should aim at (i) discovering the truth-values of philosophical propositions strictly on the basis of an evaluation of arguments on behalf of such propositions, and (ii) achieving (i) via the exegesis of the theories put forth by historical philosophical figures. I make no bones about the fact that some research in the history of philosophy is not intrinsically valuable and that a measure of Scriven's skepticism is warranted. But the upshot of my argument is that cases against doing the history of philosophy fail to secure an indictment because they operate from impoverished conceptions of (what should be) the aims of research in history of philosophy. Many of its defenders also operate from impoverished conceptions of its aims. But the fact is that much research in history of philosophy does aim at the goals I have identified, and as such it is as valuable as analytic philosophy.⁸

*Old Brewery
University of Aberdeen
Aberdeen AB24 3UB*

⁸ I thank George Pappas and Glenn Hartz for conversations about this matter. I'm also grateful to the participants at a Graduate Student Colloquium at Ohio State, including Cathal Woods, Bill Melanson, Rick Groshong and David Merli, where an earlier version of this paper was presented.

Scotland
r.nichols@abdn.ac.uk

References

- Bennett, Jonathan. 1988. "Response to Garber and Ree." In Hare (ed.) 1988, 62-69.
- Descartes, Rene. 1985. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, volume 1. Edited and translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch. New York: Cambridge.
- . 1991. *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, volume 3. Edited and translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch. New York: Cambridge.
- Garber, Daniel. 1988. "Does history have a future?" In Hare (ed.) 1988, 27-43.
- Hare, Peter, editor. 1988. *Doing Philosophy Historically*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1997. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Translated and edited by Gary Hatfield. Cambridge: Cambridge.
- Nichols, Ryan. 1999. "Space, Individuation and the Identity of Indiscernibles: Leibniz's Triumph Over Strawson." *Studia Leibnitiana* 31, 181-195.
- . 2002. "Visible Figure and Reid's Theory of Visual Perception." *Hume Studies* 28, 49-82.
- Popkin, Richard. 1985. "Philosophy and the History of Philosophy." *The Journal of Philosophy* 82, 625-632.
- Reid, Thomas. 1997. *Inquiry into the Human Mind*. Edited by Derek Brookes. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University.
- Rorty, Richard. 1984. "The historiography of philosophy: four genres." In Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner (eds.) 1984, 49-75.
- Rorty, Richard, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, editors. *Philosophy in history: essays on the historiography of philosophy*. New York: Cambridge.
- Scriven, Michael. 1988. "Increasing philosophy enrollments and appointments through better philosophy teaching." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 50: 232-244 and 326-328.
- Sleigh, Robert. 1990. *Leibniz and Arnauld: A commentary on their correspondence*. New Haven: Yale.

Strawson, Peter. 1963. *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. Garden City NY: Anchor Books.

Taylor, Charles. 1984. "Philosophy and its history." In Rorty, Schneewind and Skinner (eds.) 1984, 17-30.

Watson, Richard. 1993. "Shadow history in philosophy." *Journal for the History of Philosophy* 31, 95-109.

Wilson, Margaret. 1992. "History of philosophy in philosophy today; and the case of the sensible qualities." *The Philosophical Review* 101, 191-243.

Yolton, John. 1986. "Is there a history of philosophy?" *Synthese* 67: 3-21.