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A defense of reconstructivism*

In her recent paper, Christia Mercer has argued that contextualism is currently the only methodology in the history of early modern philosophy; its opponent, reconstructivism has been abandoned. She identifies contextualism as a methodology that adheres to the “getting things right constraint”, which is the latest incarnation of Skinner’s principle. On Mercer’s view, a historian of philosophy adheres to this constraint, if she aims at getting at the authentic view of the author, i.e., those views that the author would recognize as her own. By contrast, reconstructivists are historians of philosophy who are plucking claims and ideas from the text without concern for their textual context, i.e., who do not aim at getting to the authentic view of the author. Mercer’s aim is to present an ecumenical view: her contextualism is a badge that everyone currently working in the field should feel comfortable wearing (Mercer 2019).

In this paper, I argue that there is a live and interesting methodological disagreement by developing an alternative definition of reconstructivism and contextualism. My alternative definition reveals an implicit theoretical disagreement concerning the question, how to identify the truth-maker of philosophical interpretations, which makes a difference for the respective methodologies. Contextualism assumes that interpretations are made true by concrete particulars – utterances – and their actual properties whereas reconstructivism assumes that interpretations are made true by abstract particulars – propositions – and their properties. By presenting my alternative definitions, I concede that Mercer’s reconstructivists, who reject Mercer’s getting things right constraint, should not be counted among the historians of philosophy. However, I argue that not everyone who accepts her getting things right constraint pursues the same methodology: for contextualists, getting the historical account right means getting the utterance right, for reconstructivists, getting the proposition right. We should be aware

* I have presented a previous version of this paper at Ursula Renz’s graduate seminar at the University of Graz. I would like to thank the participants for their feedback, especially Ursula Renz and Sarah Tropper.

of this difference, otherwise we might mistake genuine methodological disagreements for first order disagreements. I proceed in four steps.

First, I argue that Skinner's principle is a theoretical and not a practical claim by briefly presenting it in its original context. Skinner's principle is meant to address the question, how to identify the meaning of a sentence, not the question, how to get to know that meaning. Consequently, the debate that originates with Skinner's principle is in the first place not about the right methodology by which one can evaluate the truth of an interpretation proposed, rather about the principles by which one can identify the truth-maker of an interpretation. Skinner's principle is about question, what it is for a sentence to have meaning, not how to get to know that meaning.

Second, I propose an alternative distinction between contextualism and reconstructivism relative to Mercer's, which focuses on the truth-maker of an interpretation. On my proposed distinction, the truth-maker of a contextualist interpretation is a concrete particular, the written utterance of a sentence in a concrete social and historical situation. By contrast, the truth-maker of a reconstructivist interpretation is an abstract particular, the proposition that the historian takes the historical author to express by her written utterance.

Third, I argue that from these different theoretical commitments follow different methodological commitments. Contextualist methodology is historicist, i.e., committed to the claims that (1) the meaning of philosophical concepts is immanent to the social and historical context, (2) the actual rather than possible meaning is the object of interpretation, and (3) philosophical claims and arguments cannot be true outside their historical and social context. By contrast, reconstructivist methodology is perennialist, i.e., committed to the claims that (1) the meaning of philosophical concepts is transcendent to the social and historical context, (2) a possible meaning can better capture a philosopher's position than what she actually meant, and (3) philosophical claims and arguments can be true outside their historical and social contexts.

I conclude by revisiting the example of the debate between Daniel Garber and Michael Della Rocca, which was the immediate context of Mercer's article. I argue that my alternative definition of contextualism and reconstructivism captures an actual methodological disagreement between them. In addition, reconstructivism's attractive methodological claims – that it is possible to understand a claim better than the historically available understanding and that historical claims can be true outside their social and historical contexts – depend on the claim that the meaning of philosophical utterances is transcendent to the social and historical context. Should a historian of philosophy wish to keep these attractive claims without accepting the whole reconstructivist package, the burden is on her to show that her methodology is coherent.

I. SKINNER'S PRINCIPLE RECONSIDERED

Even if contemporary contextualists do not necessarily accept Skinner's principle as it was originally formulated in 1969, they generally take it as a rallying point, as a first version of their methodology that was later improved upon (cf. Lærke, Smith, and Schliesser 2013. 2). Skinner's principle states that

no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done. (Skinner 1969. 28.)

The usual critique against Skinner's principle is that it proposes a methodology that is impossible to follow through, since it construes the truth of interpretations as dependent on potentially unknowable counterfactuals. This critique is formulated in especially clear terms by Koen Vermeir:

I find Skinner's principle rather unintelligible (indeed, it escapes me how I would ever convince a long dead philosopher to accept any statement I make). Even a generous interpretation of the principle, assuming an imaginary debate between the historian and the historical actor, seems to presuppose what it tries to achieve. In order to decide whether the historian presents a good interpretation of a historical statement, he or she already needs to know what the historical agent would have accepted as a correct description of what he had meant, but this is exactly what Skinner would like to find out in the first place. (Vermeir 2013. 51.)

Indeed, if Skinner's principle would imply a methodology of conducting an imaginary debate with long dead philosophers, as Vermeir suggests, it was hardly promising. The absurdity of such a methodology is nicely exemplified by Rorty's claim quoted by Vermeir, according to which we can attribute Aquinas a position that Aquinas would have adopted, had he read Newton and Hume (Vermeir 2013. 51 fn. 4). Vermeir is perfectly right to note that the empirical evidence for the truth of such claims is pretty thin (cf. Lærke 2013. 19). However, is it really such an imaginary debate that Skinner's principle is about?

If we take a closer look at the context of Skinner's principle, it becomes obvious that it isn't. The sentence that came to be known as Skinner's principle, is actually a conclusion that Skinner draws from his "logical" principle, which is the following:

if a given statement or other action has been performed by an agent at will, and has a meaning for him, it follows that any plausible account of what the agent meant must necessarily fall under, and make use of, the range of descriptions which the agent himself could at least in principle have applied to describe and classify what he was doing. (Skinner 1969. 29.)

Skinner's logical principle is a very broad theoretical claim about the meaning of intentional human behavior. His point is that human actions – including the utterance of sentences – has meaning because of the agent's intention. The way in which Skinner's logical principle encompasses both actions and utterances indicates that by the "in principle" applicability of descriptions non-occurrent intentions are meant. To elaborate on Donald Davidson's famous example: one does not always think "I intend to switch on the light" when switching on the light. Still, one would accept "switching on the light" as a description of what one was doing, since one had the intention of doing so. By contrast, one would not accept "alerting the burglar" as a correct description of what one was doing, even if one has in fact alerted the burglar, since one had no intention of alerting the burglar.¹

That Skinner's logical principle is about the determination of the meaning of intentional behavior by the agent's intentions is further supported by Skinner's explicit reference to Austin's speech act theory. According to Austin's speech act theory, one should distinguish the "locutionary content" and the "illocutionary force" of a speech act. In a nutshell, the locutionary content of a sentence is its propositional content, whereas its illocutionary force is the act performed by uttering the sentence. To take a trivial example, the same sentence "there is the door" can have very different meanings when uttered in different contexts, e.g., when it is a reply to an inquiry about the location of the door or when it is an implicit suggestion that the other person should leave. On Austin's theory, the locutionary content of the sentence is the same, but it has different illocutionary forces in different contexts (Lycan 2008. 148). Skinner's claim is that the meaning of an utterance includes its illocutionary force, which is determined by the intention of the agent. Therefore, one cannot properly attribute meaning to historical texts – written utterances – without paying attention to the author's intention.

The way in which Skinner's logical principle is formulated with the help of Austin's philosophy of language indicates that the often-criticized clause about what the historical author could be brought to accept is not about counterfactual scenarios (like what Aquinas would have accepted, had he read Newton),

¹ Note that according to Davidson's position, the agent did alert the burglar because switching on the light is just alerting the burglar; cf. Davidson 1963. I am not committed to any particular interpretation of the philosophy of action presupposed by Skinner's account, still, I think that the general idea behind Skinner's claim is fairly clear.

rather about different descriptions of the speaker's intention determining the illocutionary force of the speech act. Just as one would accept "switching on the light" but not "alerting the burglar" as a correct description of what one is doing when switching on the light – even if one did not consciously entertain such an intention – one would accept certain propositions but not others as correct descriptions of what one has meant with a speech act.

It is still an open question, how one would know what the long-dead speaker's intention was. But the point is that all descriptions are descriptions of an *actual* and spatiotemporally located intention that actually determined the meaning of an *actual* speech act. Whether or not we are going to find out what a historical author meant by a given statement, Skinner's point is that there is a fact of the matter what she meant, that is, what she intended to mean by it. History of philosophy should aim at finding out what the given statement's meaning is – fixed by the speaker's intention – rather than attributing meaning to the statement based on what we, historians, take it to mean. While I am aware that most contextualists today do not accept Skinner's principle as formulated in his original paper, I argue that the characteristic claim of contextualism is still the same: that the statements of historical authors have an *actual* and historically immanent meaning fixed by the *actual* context of the utterance.

II. PROPOSITION AND UTTERANCE

When we look at recent theoretical defenses of contextualism, we find that the common thread in their approaches is an adherence to the claim that history is about what actually happened rather than about what could have happened (Lærke 2013; Vermeir 2013; Smith 2013; Catana 2013). This is fleshed out as the claim that philosophical utterances have meaning only in the context of a specific discussion, hence the name of contextualism.

This view has a fair degree of plausibility: the claim "God has died" certainly has different meanings in the context of Nietzsche's *Thus spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 2013. 1:111) and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1986. 547). Not only is this claim plausible, the view that history is in the business of describing what was actually the case, also has an ancient and prestigious pedigree. Famously, Ranke formulated in his *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations* that the aim of history is not to teach the moral truth, rather to show "how it [the historical event] really was."² In a similar manner, Aristotle notes in Chapter IX of his *Poetics* that history relates the particular and the actual, whereas poetry

² "Er will blos zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen." (Ranke 1885. vii), translation mine. For Ranke, this means that history is not philosophy, the latter of which is in the business of teaching moral truths.

describes the universal and possible.³ Their obvious and substantial differences notwithstanding, authors as far away in time as Aristotle and Ranke conceived of history as a descriptive science: a good piece of historical writing represents what the case was.

Along these lines, Vermeir distinguishes the philosopher from the historian of philosophy. On his view, the philosopher is someone who “wonders how phenomena or concepts are interrelated with other phenomena and concepts” whereas the historian of philosophy asks “how these phenomena or concepts have come into being” (Vermeir 2013. 56). The historian of philosophy aims at getting the historical story right, i.e., to describe the actual way in which philosophers produced philosophical claims. As he notes, a philosopher could have had many reasons for uttering a claim, but the historian of philosophy is only interested in the one reason that actually caused the utterance.

In a similar manner, Justin E. H. Smith argues that the intention of the author determines the meaning of the philosophical utterance in the same way as the intention of the maker determines the meaning of a stone tool. Both the philosophical utterance in the form of a text and the stone tool are material objects that were produced with a determinate aim in mind. In the case of the stone tool, the author intended “to break stuff”, in the case of the philosophical text, she intended it to be read by others. On Smith’s view, unless one is able to link a proposed interpretation to the intention of the author, one runs the risk of mistaking accidental features of the text for its meaningful features (Smith 2013. 34–35). Just as features of the stone tool that were not intentionally chosen or made are meaningless, some features of the text are simply accidents that do not have meaning because they were not meant to convey meaning.

What is common to Smith’s and Vermeir’s contextualist approaches is that they treat philosophical claims as concrete particulars, as one of the many artefacts of the material culture of a society. A historical culture produces a number of different concrete particulars: weapons, buildings, and philosophical texts, all of which reflect the intentions and beliefs of their authors, as well as the norms and institutions of the given society. Therefore, the study of philosophical texts should not radically differ from the study of the other concrete particulars that the given culture has produced. To cite Smith’s example, when one attributes meaning to a stone tool, one treats it as the material representation of certain

³ Aristotle 1995. 1450b36–1451a11. For Aristotle, this means that events described by tragedy, unlike those described by history, have to have meaning. If a general dies in a heart attack before the climactic battle of a campaign, that is a historic event that has to be narrated as it is: a meaningless accident. By contrast, such a sudden and meaningless death is unacceptable in a tragedy. If Sophocles’ play would end with Kreon’s death because of a sudden heart attack, all tragic effect would be lost. For an account that situates history of philosophy decidedly in the “other” camp (what would be philosophy for Ranke and poetry for Aristotle), see Schliesser 2013.

social and individual beliefs. For example, that the stone tool is the best tool in order to break stuff, that the given material and the given shape are the most efficient for that purpose, and that stuff should be broken. In a similar manner, a philosophical text should be treated as the material representation of certain social and individual beliefs. For example, that some people are to be convinced about some ideas, that the given literary form and the given choice of words are the most efficient for that purpose, what the ideas are that the other needs to be convinced about and what the ideas are that the other probably accepts without the need of convincing.

On the contextualist approach, the text has only as much meaning as the minds of actual and historical figures – or, to use Lærke’s terminology: historically immanent perspectives (Lærke 2013. 23) – attributed to it either by producing or by understanding it. If we were able to discover all the actual causes that contributed to the production and contextually internal reception of the philosophical text, all implicit social norms, argumentative assumptions, authorial intentions and discursive contexts, the complete meaning of the text would be described. Of course, the historical reality is far too complex for the historian to come even close to such an achievement, authorial intentions are beyond her reach, discursive contexts, norms and assumptions are preserved only partially. But there is an actual fact of the matter what that philosophical text means, which is embodied in the concrete particular and which makes interpretations true. A philosophical interpretation is true if it describes what is actually the case, if it represents a concrete particular – the philosophical utterance – correctly in virtue of attributing to it the meaning that it actually had. In the same way, the historical interpretation of the stone tool is true if it describes what is actually the case, if it represents the stone tool as the material manifestation of those beliefs and norms which in fact led to its production and regulated its use.

The crucial assumption behind the contextualist methodology is the claim that the “matter” of philosophical utterances is as meaningless as the stone of which the stone tool has been made. This assumption motivates the view that each utterance has only as much meaning that someone has put into it: either the agent (Skinner 1969; Smith 2013) or the society as the set of historical agents (Lærke 2013; Vermeir 2013; Waugh and Ariew 2013). On all contextualist accounts, the philosophical utterance only has the meaning that a historical agent actually took it to mean. This is, however, not that the only way of looking at philosophical utterances. Reconstructivism argues that the “matter” of philosophical utterances can have logical and inferential relations independently of authorial intentions and social practices.

At the core of reconstructivist methodology is the assumption that philosophical utterances express propositions that have meaning and stand in inferential relations independently of the social and historical context in which the utterance was made. Unlike utterances that are concrete particulars, propositions

are abstract particulars that can stand in relations independently of the historical context. Therefore, the utterance can have the meaning that it has not in virtue of its concrete particular causes, rather in virtue of the abstract particular it expresses. And the meaning that the utterance has in virtue of the expressed proposition can be such that no historical agent took the utterance to mean. To develop Smith's analogy, the historical author does not work like the craftsman shaping the inert stone according to her will, rather like a trainer making the animal do her bidding. Although the trainer's aims and intentions have a significant influence on what the animal does, the animal has a life of her own, and no account of what the animal does is complete, without consideration of that life.

Following this assumption, the reconstructivist does not aim at reconstructing what historical agents took the utterance to mean, rather at discovering what proposition is expressed by the utterance. The reconstructivist does not deny the importance of the context and does not deny that the same sentence can have different meanings in different contexts, as the sentence "God has died" in Hegel's and Nietzsche's works. What the reconstructivist denies is that the same sentence in Hegel's and Nietzsche's works has different meanings because the historical agents took it to mean different things. Rather, it means different things because it expresses different propositions. Insisting on the identification of the proposition expressed by the utterance might sound like nit-picking: what determines, after all, what proposition is expressed by the sentence, if not authorial intentions and social conventions? But the point is that propositions, unlike utterances, have a life of their own: even if authorial intentions and social conventions determine what proposition is expressed by a given utterance, by expressing that proposition, one can say more or something else than what one has intended, or what the others took one to have intended.

As we will see in the next section, insisting on the claim that ultimately propositions and not utterances have meaning, i.e., that the truth-maker of a philosophical interpretation is the (set of) proposition(s) expressed by the utterance rather than the utterance, has far-reaching consequences. The claim that the proposition makes philosophical interpretations true entails that the meaning is historically and socially transcendent. If the meaning is historically transcendent, it is possible for philosophers of different ages to mean the same thing, it is possible for the historian of philosophy to truthfully attribute meaning to a philosophical utterance which no historical agent took it to mean, and it is possible for a philosophical claim to be true outside its historical and social context.

III. HISTORICIST AND PERENNIALIST METHODOLOGIES

1. The meaning of philosophical concepts: historically immanent or transcendent?

The contextualist claim that the meaning of philosophical utterances is determined by historically immanent causes implies that philosophical concepts and problems are also immanent to the given historical and social context. Joanna Waugh and Roger Ariew argue especially clearly for the claim that the concepts used in philosophical utterances do not differ from ordinary concepts, both of which have meaning only with reference to the form of life which the historical author using the given concepts lived. Therefore, it is impossible to translate *salve veritate* philosophical claims (or any other claim for that matter) from a historical language to modern parlance (Waugh and Ariew 2013, 108). At the core of their argument is the claim that philosophical utterances are embodied speech acts (Waugh and Ariew 2013, 93). Therefore, much more belongs to the meaning of an utterance than what can be translated. When understanding spoken speech acts, one cannot abstract from the gestures and intonation of the speaker; when understanding written speech acts, one cannot abstract away from the material and historical context in which the written speech acts were performed (Waugh and Ariew 2013, 110). Similarly to gestures and intonations, philosophical concepts are immanent to the form of life in which the philosophical author lived. Philosophical concepts only have meaning in the given material and historical context, since they represent material inferential practices of the given society (Waugh and Ariew 2013, 111–12). Since philosophical concepts are historically immanent, philosophical problems are also relative to the normative structure of the social space of the author. A philosophical problem is the need to make such normative structures of the social space explicit. In determining what counts as a successful solution to a philosophical problem, philosophical authority rests with the community of inquirers who are committed to living in a shared space of reason (Waugh and Ariew 2013, 113).

Whereas the reconstructivist does not disregard the material and historical contexts, she denies that philosophical concepts represent historically immanent normative structures. Rather, she argues that concepts are abstract particulars, which are building blocks of propositions expressed by the embodied speech acts. Since meaning is an abstract particular, the intonations and gestures of the author do not prevent meaning from being capable of getting translated *salve veritate* to other languages. Intonations, gestures, the material and historical contexts of the philosophical utterance either contribute to the expression of a proposition, in which case the same meaning can be expressed in other material and historical contexts as well, or they are meaningless. That is, reconstructivism entails the view that philosophical problems are perennial: philosophical problems concern the way in which propositions hang together rather than the

explication of the normative structure of a social space. Therefore, reconstructivism entails collegialism: it is perfectly possible that philosophers of different ages have worked on the same problems, since the meaning they have expressed transcends their social and historical context. The claim that Plato and Rawls worked on the same philosophical problem involving the same concept when writing about justice is not ridiculous, it is just very contentious. Whether or not it is true is an empirical question that needs to be decided by discovering the propositions each author expressed in their respective works.

2. The meaning to be interpreted: actual or possible?

The contextualist claim that philosophical utterances only mean what historical agents took them to mean entails that the aim of the history of philosophy is to reconstruct the actual meaning that philosophical utterances have. This view is stated especially clearly by Mogens Lærke, who presents his contextualist view as a correction of Skinner's principle. He argues that Skinner's principle has two major shortcomings.

First, Skinner's principle assigns the author an oversized role in determining the meaning of her utterances. What the author took the meaning of a historical text to be is certainly part of its true meaning, but its true historical meaning contains more than that. To take Lærke's example, even if it is quite unlikely that the meaning Toland attributed to Spinoza's works in his *Letters to Serena* would be the same as the meaning that Spinoza attributed to his own works, the meaning attributed by Toland is part of the true historical meaning of Spinoza's works (Lærke 2013, 16–17).

Second, Skinner's principle admits possible meanings that the historical author could have accepted but didn't actually adopt. On Lærke's view, it is unacceptable for a historian to admit meanings that cannot be attributed to a specific person at a specific moment, even constructs like "an educated seventeenth-century European" are problematic to his mind, since there has never been a generic intellectual, there were specific people with specific beliefs. Therefore, any interpretation has to attribute a meaning to a text from the perspective of a specific person (Lærke 2013, 24–26).

Based on these two corrections, Lærke argues that "the true historical meaning of a past philosophical text should be defined *as the sum of actual historically immanent or contextually internal perspectives on that past philosophical text*" (Lærke 2013, 23 italics in the original), where these perspectives usually "do *not* converge toward a single unified interpretation" (Lærke 2013, 24 italics in the original).

By contrast, the reconstructivist view that the meaning of philosophical utterances are the abstract propositions with inferential properties that transcend the given social and historical context entails that the aim of the history of philoso-

phy is to discover the (set of) proposition(s) expressed by the written utterance. The utterance can be taken to express a proposition if the proposition explains the utterance's features. I call the proposition possible rather than actual because the attribution of a proposition to a historical utterance does not entail the claim that historical figures actually entertained that proposition. It only entails the claim that the features of the utterance of the historical author are explainable on the assumption that the utterance expresses this proposition. In the case of rival claims, the (set of) proposition(s) that explains more features of the written utterance should be adopted without consideration to actual authorial intentions and contextually immanent reception.

Thus, reconstructivist methodology is not in the business of unearthing the *actual* meaning of the utterance by discovering the authorial intentions and contextually immanent reception of the text, rather in the business of discovering a *possible* meaning of the utterance by discovering a (set of) proposition(s) that explains the features of the utterance. Those features of the utterance can include relations to other utterances made by the same author and to utterances made by contextually internal historical figures as a response to the original utterance. While this claim comes very close to the contextualist methodology in many respects, the disregard for the actual meaning allows for the truthful attribution of propositions that involve concepts demonstrably unavailable in the given historical context. That is, reconstructivism allows that the historical author expressed a view that she herself did not understand and that was only expressed adequately at a later point of history. However, this is only the case, if the assumption that the historical author expressed that view explains more features of the historical author's utterance than rival interpretations.

Thus, reconstructivist methodology allows that we have a better access to the propositions expressed by the historical author than the historical figures did. Therefore, it is perfectly legitimate to attribute meaning to a past philosophical utterance that it could have, but not a single historical figure took it to mean. To take the example discussed by Tad M. Schmaltz in his contribution to the present special issue: it is highly unlikely that anyone in the seventeenth century attributed meaning to Spinoza's claims about the substance's attributes with the help of the concepts of Fregean philosophy; still, we can claim that what Spinoza actually meant is best expressed by Fregean concepts. That is, we can claim truthfully that the actual historical meaning of Spinoza's utterances is a set of propositions that involve concepts that were first explicitly articulated 200 years after the author's death, that Spinoza's authentic view is a view that involves concepts that were not available for him. Of course, such a claim is impossible to make on contextualist grounds, since no historical author took Spinoza to use those concepts, and those concepts were not even available in the period.

Before turning to the next methodological issue, I would like to briefly address a possible objection to this point. One might want to argue that the propo-

sed reconstructivist methodology either results in implausible claims, or it is parasitic on the contextualist research program. Either the reconstructivist takes into account the contextualist research into historical, material, and discursive contexts, and then simply pretends that she has discovered the meaning unearthed by her contextualist colleagues by eyeballing the historical text, or the reconstructivist proposes meanings that are obviously off the track. My answer is twofold.

First, it should be clarified what is meant by the interpretation being off the track in this case. If it means that the proposed meaning is not historically immanent, that is not an objection, that is just the reconstructivist position. If the proposed meaning is off the track in the sense that it conflicts with the historical evidence and there is a rival interpretation that is more in accordance with the historical evidence, that can explain more features of the text, then the proposed interpretation is simply not a good one according to the principles of reconstructivist methodology. To develop Skinner's example, the claim that Marsilius of Padua enunciated a doctrine of separations of powers (Skinner 1969, 29) is false not because he did not intend to do that, rather because there are interpretations that account for features of his text better.

Second, one should not underestimate the interpretative potential of eyeballing the text. While I agree that disregarding the historical context is always bad practice in the history of philosophy, I deny that the only access we have to the meaning of historical texts is through their historical context. A case in point is Thomas of Aquinas reading Aristotle. Aquinas did not read the original text, only a rather corrupt translation of the text. His knowledge of the social and material context of ancient Greece was fragmentary at best. His understanding of the discursive context is even more spotty, he did not even have access to the immediate discursive context, to Plato's texts, to any meaningful extent. Still, his commentaries to Aristotle's major works attest an understanding of the meaning of Aristotle's claims that is arguably superior to the understanding of many modern scholars, who have access to critical editions of the original text and a vast historical knowledge of 4th century BCE Greek society. I argue that explaining the quality of Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle based on contextualist principles is at least challenging.

3. The truth of philosophical claims: historically immanent or transcendent?

The contextualist position – according to which philosophical problems, as well as the concepts and claims addressing those problems, are historically immanent – entails that philosophical claims are only true or false in their historical and social contexts. Justin E. H. Smith expresses this point quite vividly by comparing past philosophical ideas to ancient pots found at archeological sites.

It would be quite preposterous to evaluate the significance of these pots by their ability to hold water, we value them because they are artefacts of past material cultures that represent the beliefs of members of the past society. In a similar manner, past philosophical ideas are valued because they show how members of a past society thought, not because they would fare well in the context of contemporary debates. We value Kenelm Digby's false theory of weapon salve simply because it shows that there was a person in the 17th century who held this theory (Smith 2013, 41).

Along these lines, a contextualist should be interested in Kant's moral philosophy not because it is instructive for members of our society, rather because there is a historical truth that once lived a person called Immanuel Kant who expressed these views. And that tells us a great deal about the 18th-century German society in which Kant lived. From Smith's analogy it follows that the question whether Kant's moral philosophy is true from our perspective is beside the point, just as it is an uninteresting fact that the ancient pot still holds water. As Vermeir notes when discussing alchemical texts: the historian of philosophy should be careful not to make claims about the "truth" of past philosophical claims in the context of contemporary discourse, since no meaningful result is to be expected from making such claims. Vermeir describes a modern scientist studying the text by conducting the experiments described in it. Had the modern scientist pushed the experiments described by the alchemists to the end, she would have either arrived at the transmutation of gold, which is impossible according to modern science, or she would have concluded that the procedure described was nonsense or fraud, which the historian should not do, since her aim is to describe the worldview of the historical author rather than what the modern historian takes to be the case (Vermeir 2013, 68).

By contrast, the reconstructivist rejects this historical relativism entailed by the contextualist program. According to the reconstructivist, historical authors express timeless propositions formulated with the help of timeless concepts. Of course, the question which timeless proposition is expressed by the temporally situated utterance is always up for debate. But the assumption is that the same proposition can be expressed by authors of different historical and social contexts, which entails that past philosophical claims, the propositions expressed by past philosophical utterances, can be true or false in the context of contemporary philosophy. The reconstructivist rejects the contextualist's methodological modesty proper to a historian of science.

In the history of science, it is just obvious that past texts are not to be approached in an appropriationist manner, it is unlikely that past theories would yield arguments useful in the present context. No one reads Aristotle's natural scientific theory about the impact of climate on human cognitive capacities with an eye to its applicability in contemporary contexts. By contrast, the reconstructivist is appropriationist in the sense that she reads Aristotle's theory of natural slavery

with an eye to its viability in contemporary contexts. That this is a natural assumption in the history of philosophy becomes obvious if we compare articles on the history of science with articles on the history of philosophy. Whereas no one expects the author of an historical article on ancient astronomy to state her allegiance to the scientific truth that the Earth is round and moving around the sun, one would be rather perplexed if an historical article would simply present Aristotle's theory of natural slavery without disavowing those views (cf. Heath 2008. 2 fn. 4).

IV. A DEFENSE OF RECONSTRUCTIVISM

In this paper, I have presented alternative definitions of contextualism and reconstructivism relative to Mercer's. I have argued that the difference between contextualism and reconstructivism is based on their differing views concerning the question what the truth-maker of a philosophical interpretation is. Contextualism is predicated on the assumption that the truth-maker is the concrete particular, the utterance that has meaning from the actual and concrete context, which can include authorial intentions, normative practices of the given society or historically immanent perspectives on the text. From this assumption follows a historicist methodology, which aims at describing the actual meaning that historical figures took the utterance to have, and which is of purely historical interest. By contrast, reconstructivism is predicated on the assumption that the truth-maker is the abstract particular, the utterance that has meaning and inferential properties independent of the social and historical context. From this assumption follows a perennialist methodology, which aims at describing the possible meaning that the philosophical utterance can have, and which is of philosophical interest.

My alternative definition of reconstructivism embraces the labels of collegialism and appropriationism attributed to it by Mercer, but justifies them on methodological grounds. Reconstructivism is collegialist because it is perennialist: if philosophical problems and concepts are timeless, there is no reason to rule out the possibility that philosophers of faraway ages worked on the same problem. Of course, whether this is the case needs to be shown empirically, i.e., by showing that propositions about the same problems are those that make the most sense of the utterances of both philosophers. Reconstructivism is appropriationist for the same reason: if philosophical problems are not relative to the form of life lived by the author, but rather timeless, we should not rule out the possibility that historical authors can have interesting things to say about the problems with which we grapple, since our problems can very well be the same as their problems. Again, whether the past author has anything interesting to say about our

problems needs to be shown empirically. I conclude by considering two possible objections to my argument.

First, one might object that what I say is irrelevant to the ongoing debate, since my alternative definition concerns something else than what Mercer is talking about. Mercer aims at showing that the methodology that does not take into account the context in which the historical texts were written, is not tenable anymore. My reconstructivists are, however, not the same people against whom Mercer argues, since my reconstructivists take into account the context in which the historical text was written, they just assume that its meaning is timeless and not concrete.

Martin Lenz recounts in his blog post his experience at a conference, where Robert Brandom rejected the textual evidence presented by Markus Wild against Brandom's reading of Hume by simply stating that textual evidence does not matter (Lenz 2019). I agree that this is not good practice in the history of philosophy. What I deny is that rejecting this bad practice, which Mercer does for good reasons, ends the interesting methodological debates. Mercer's paper not only presents an argument against the kind of history of philosophy exemplified by Brandom's reaction, her paper argues that the methodological debate is over with this rejection. Contrary to this claim, I argue that after having rejected Mercer's reconstructivists there is still room for an interesting debate between my reconstructivists and contextualists.

That there is room for debate is illustrated by the exchange between Daniel Garber and Michael Della Rocca. Mercer used the example of this debate in order to argue that Garber and Della Rocca actually pursue the same contextualist methodology. On Mercer's view, since they both subscribe to Mercer's getting things right constraint and they both strive to present the authentic views of the author, they are both contextualists. I agree that they both want to get the authentic view of the author right. However, I argue that there is still a fundamental methodological disagreement between Della Rocca and Garber concerning the metaphysical status of the authentic view that they aim to get right. For Garber, the authentic view is the concrete particular, the utterance in its social and historical context. For Della Rocca, the authentic view is the abstract particular, the proposition with its timeless inferential properties.

This disagreement is most obvious when it comes to inconsistencies in Spinoza's philosophy. Garber castigates Della Rocca for not presenting what Spinoza actually meant, only what Spinoza could have meant and what would make sense of his utterances (Garber 2015. 520). Garber himself prefers to present Spinoza in the context of the historical contingencies shaping "the twists and turns, the ambiguities and inconsistencies" in his views (Garber 2015. 521). Della Rocca retorts that he meant to present Spinoza's authentic position even if Spinoza himself failed to completely appreciate the consequences of his own position (Della Rocca 2015. 527). Della Rocca aims at making Spinoza's position

intelligible, which requires that we assume that the claims Spinoza made are compatible (Della Rocca 2015. 534).

Whereas Mercer is perfectly right to note that both Garber and Della Rocca aim at presenting the authentic view of Spinoza, I argue that they disagree about the possibility of attributing inconsistencies to Spinoza because they disagree on what it is that they are looking for. Garber is happy to attribute inconsistent views to Spinoza, since what Garber intends to reconstruct is the philosophical utterance that has its meaning from the actual context of the utterance. If the historical author expressed inconsistent views, that is an interesting historical fact that needs to be explained with the help of actual causes – motivations, historical contingencies pulling the author to different directions. By contrast, Della Rocca intends to reconstruct the (set of) proposition(s) expressed by Spinoza's utterances. Propositions have inferential properties independently of the social and historical context. If the historical author makes utterances that express inconsistent propositions, this shows that the historical author failed to appreciate her own position.

Second, one might argue that my alternative definitions present a false dilemma, since actual historians of philosophy do not embrace either extreme position, rather pursue a mixed methodology. Such a mixed methodology would reject reconstructivism's unattractive assumption of timeless concepts and propositions while preserving its attractive claims that philosophical claims can be true outside their historical and social contexts and that historians are free to use contemporary concepts in interpreting past philosophical utterances. Such a position would aim at reconstructing the meaning of the past philosophical utterance from its actual historical context, but then it would not shy away from considering that meaning in the context of contemporary debates.

To this challenge, I reply that I agree that such a mixed methodology would be attractive, but I doubt that it is coherent. I have argued that the attractive methodological claims of reconstructivism follow from its theoretical assumptions about the perennial philosophical concepts and propositions expressed by philosophical utterances. Unless a philosophical utterance can get meaning from a source other than the actual historical context in which it was made, it is hard to see how it is possible to attribute meaning to a past philosophical utterance other than what historical figures took the utterance to mean. Unless the meaning of philosophical concepts transcends the social and historical context, philosophical claims using those concepts cannot be relevant in other social and historical contexts. If philosophical concepts represent the material inferential practices of societies, it is hard to see how philosophical problems originating in different forms of life could be relevant for us. If someone wishes to still pursue such a mixed methodology, the burden is on her to show its coherence.

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