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Article abstract

In this short contribution I argue that the history of philosophy has much to gain from an engagement with the questions and conceptual tools of contemporary (analytic) philosophy. In particular I argue against the view that the historian of philosophy's engagement with contemporary philosophy necessarily leads to anachronism. Whatever the risks of failure, they seem to be outweighed by the potential for insight. Advocates of a "purely" historical approach to the history of philosophy defend their approach by pointing to the idea that the history of philosophy can and should be studied on its own terms and independently of our current philosophical interests. I try to show that this is an illusion.

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IN DEFENCE OF ANACHRONISM*

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RÉSUMÉ : Dans cette contribution, je soutiens que l'histoire de la philosophie a beaucoup à gagner d'un engagement avec les questions et les outils conceptuels de la philosophie (analytique) contemporaine. En particulier, je réfute l'idée qu'entrer en dialogue avec la philosophie contemporaine mène inévitablement l'historien de la philosophie à l'anachronisme. Quels que soient les risques d'échec, ils semblent être contrebalancés par les gains de connaissance rendus possibles par un tel dialogue. Les partisans d'une approche « purement » historique de l'histoire de la philosophie se défendent en soutenant que l'histoire de la philosophie ne peut et ne doit être étudiée que selon ses propres critères et indépendamment de nos intérêts philosophiques actuels. J'essaie de montrer que ceci est une illusion.

ABSTRACT : In this short contribution I argue that the history of philosophy has much to gain from an engagement with the questions and conceptual tools of contemporary (analytic) philosophy. In particular I argue against the view that the historian of philosophy's engagement with contemporary philosophy necessarily leads to anachronism. Whatever the risks of failure, they seem to be outweighed by the potential for insight. Advocates of a "purely" historical approach to the history of philosophy defend their approach by pointing to the idea that the history of philosophy can and should be studied on its own terms and independently of our current philosophical interests. I try to show that this is an illusion.

I normally try to stay away as far as possible from debates about philosophical methodology in general and the methodology of the history of philosophy in particular. No doubt this will strike many as naive. But as my wife tends to remind me, using a popular French proverb : "C'est au pied du mur qu'on reconnaît le maçon". Aren't debates about methodology best settled by looking at the results to which different approaches lead ? Isn't the best method in the history of philosophy one that gets the views of previous philosophers right ? The tendency to focus on outcomes is undeniably also driven by the feeling that methodological discussions are often abstract and vague. My uneasiness about dealing with the topic of methodology in the history of philosophy is compounded by the fact that this short contribution appears together with the thoughts of two genuine masters of the history of medieval philosophy, Claude Lafleur and Claude Panaccio, both of whom follow very different approaches in their own work and from whom I have learned a great deal. I therefore ask for your patience with the sketchy nature of my remarks.

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* This is a revised and enlarged version of my contribution to the round table "Vérité et méthode en histoire de la philosophie", which was held at Université Laval in honour of Claude Panaccio.

Claude Panaccio has just published a remarkable book that proves wrong all those who think, as I used to myself, that engaging with the methodology of the history of philosophy is abstract, vague, and ultimately not very helpful.[1] In an almost Kantian spirit, his *Récit et reconstruction* is an inquiry into the conditions of the possibility of the history of philosophy. How is it that we can understand and even learn something from past philosophers and their works ? What are the practices employed by the historian of philosophy and what justifies them ? Yet apart from being itself a work of philosophy, Panaccio's book is full of examples of the different ways of pursuing the history of philosophy. Rather than legislating from on high about what counts as good history of philosophy and what as bad, he recognizes the differences between the various enterprises that historians of philosophy pursue, differences that are ultimately grounded in different practices, all of which have a legitimate place in the history of philosophy.

I have nothing important to add to Panaccio's examination of why what we historians of philosophy do is after all not without foundation. My concern is rather with the sometimes uneasy relationship between contemporary (analytic) philosophy and the history of philosophy. At the end of his book, Panaccio points out that showing that it is possible to use philosophical works and doctrines of the past is not the same as showing that using them is necessary or even helpful.[2] Certainly, this is a question that can lead to heated debates. But it is still another question to ask whether contemporary philosophy is useful for understanding the history of philosophy. It is this latter question that I would like to pursue for a moment.

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I firmly believe that one cannot separate methodological questions regarding how to do history of philosophy from questions about the goal or purpose of the history of philosophy. For it is the purpose that ultimately determines the method, or at least determines some key parameters of what might eventually count as a successful endeavour in the study of the history of philosophy. Now, it is often noted that philosophy is unique among the academic disciplines in that it takes its history to be an integral part of itself as a discipline. This is not to say that all philosophers have a high opinion of the history of philosophy or that they all share to the same degree a belief in the value of studying the thoughts and views of past thinkers — rather the opposite. However, unlike in, say, mathematics, physics, biology, or medicine, there is nothing prima facie strange in doing philosophy by turning to what philosophers hundreds or even thousands of years ago thought about a given topic.

There are presumably many different reasons for the intimate connection between philosophy and its history. First, studying philosophers of the past is undoubtedly an

1. C. PANACCIO, *Récit et reconstruction. Les fondements de la méthode en histoire de la philosophie*, Paris, Vrin, 2019.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

excellent preparation for learning how to do philosophy. In this sense, the history of philosophy plays an important propaedeutic role. Second, there are historical reasons for the connection between philosophy and its history. The works of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel are just some examples that show how philosophers of all periods considered it necessary to engage with their predecessors. However, Aristotle and other past philosophers would not have been interested in their predecessors had they not seen some special value in examining their predecessors' points of view : presumably, they found these earlier approaches illuminating for their own efforts to defend new philosophical ideas and approaches and to get things right.[3] Third, the history of philosophy is considered important in philosophy because it can help directly in addressing contemporary philosophical questions, be it by presenting us defensible responses to philosophical questions (say, "What is the good life ?") or by providing us with insights into what won't work, or simply by showing us different approaches and viewpoints which shed light on the contemporary philosophical questions we are attempting to address. This third reason is, in my view, the most important reason why the history of philosophy is part of philosophy.

I am aware that this is controversial. On the one hand, many of those who practise philosophy today think that the history of philosophy is irrelevant and something that needs rather to be overcome and left behind if our goal is to make progress. In this they are correct, insofar as they believe that philosophy needs to reach out to other disciplines to make progress in many of its subfields. Yet they go wrong when they think that such progress requires us to forget about the origin of the very questions they pursue and the origin of the very concepts in which they frame their investigation. Why not simply keep an open mind ?[4] On the other hand, historians of philosophy may take offence at what looks like an overtly instrumentalist understanding of their enterprise. Is there not also an intrinsic value in pursuing the history of philosophy ?

Let me explain why I believe that the history of philosophy has a lot to gain if we understand its role as directed towards the contemporary practice of philosophy. In doing so, I do not of course claim that this is the only valuable way of doing history of philosophy.

In a famous contribution in the 1980s, the scholar of ancient philosophy Michael Frede highlighted what he considered to be the two main traditions in the historiography of philosophy. The first goes back to antiquity and can be called the doxographic tradition. According to this approach, the historian of philosophy sees her role as unearthing philosophical positions of the past that she still finds worthwhile considered from a philosophical perspective, even if they are now considered wrong.

3. THOMAS AQUINAS famously wrote that "the study of philosophy is not about getting to know what people once believed, but what the truth of things is (*qualiter se habeat veritas rerum*)" (*Commentary on Aristotle's On the Heavens*, book I, lect. 22). On can assume that the sentiment expressed in this statement also indicates something about how he approaches the views of his predecessors.

4. This attitude is similar to that of someone who decides, somewhat arbitrarily, not to read any secondary literature from before a given year, nor anything that is not published in his native tongue. The fact that these attitudes (unfortunately) exist does not mean they are justified.

The origin of the second tradition lies, according to Frede, in the eighteenth century. Unlike the doxographic tradition, this second approach is based on the conviction that the philosophical positions of the past are no longer worthy of being considered as real contributions to philosophy. If they are still worth our attention, it is because they represent the stages by which we historically arrived at what is valuable in philosophy today. As Frede notes, however, once you adopt this latter attitude it is easy to make a further step :

> [I]t is easy to see that the enterprise of reconstructing the development of philosophy, though originally inspired by such philosophical convictions and interest, in fact does not rest on them. And so, in the course of the nineteenth century, we see how these philosophical assumptions about the history of philosophy get shelved by historians like Zeller. What emerges is a discipline that, with the tools of the historian, tries to do no more, but also no less, than to reconstruct historically the development of philosophy.[5]

Here we encounter what almost looks like a distinct third approach, an approach that Frede himself seems to favour. It may strike us at first as surprising that Frede prefers a strictly historical approach to the history of philosophy. Shouldn't the doxographical approach be held in higher esteem among historians of philosophy, not only because it has a longer pedigree, but also because it treats philosophical views in the past as somewhat relevant for current engagement ? Frede thinks otherwise :

> I have no objection to a philosophically oriented study of the history of philosophy in the doxographical tradition, though I find that the use of the word "history" for this sort of study is somewhat misleading. If I insist on the distinction it is because it is often overlooked, especially by philosophers, though there is a fundamental difference, both in principle and in practice, and because I think that the kind of history of philosophy in the doxographical tradition which philosophers continue to practice to the present day, a study which imposes our philosophical views and interests on the history of philosophy, ultimately presupposes the second kind of history of philosophy, i.e., a study of the history of philosophy in its own right, on its own terms, quite independently of our philosophical views, interests, and standards.[6]

I admire Frede's work greatly, but I find his reasoning here a bit too quick. I agree that a doxographical approach presupposes the careful study of the history of philosophy in its own right. For if our interest is to make a philosophical consideration or position from the past accessible for use in contemporary debates, as the doxographical approach intends to do, then we better make sure what that philosophical consideration or position actually amounts to. Clearly, if you think Aristotle's account of, say, virtue or his hylomorphism is worth engaging with nowadays — as many current philosophers do —, then you better get Aristotle's views right. But even

5. Michael FREDE, "The History of Philosophy as a Discipline", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 85, 11 (1988), p. 666-672, at p. 667. Frede's reconstruction of the historiography of philosophy has not gone unchallenged. For a recent criticism see Leo CATANA, "Doxographical or Philosophical History of Philosophy : On Michael Frede's Precepts for Writing the History of Philosophy", *History of European Ideas*, 42, 2 (2016), p. 170-177. In my view, however, nothing much depends on whether or not Frede is right in how he reads eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians of philosophy. For his distinction between the three approaches can still be maintained and made plausible, even if he is wrong in how he attributes them to particular authors.

6. FREDE, "The History of Philosophy as a Discipline", p. 668.

if you personally don't care to get all the details right, there is good reason why you should care, since settling for incomplete insight might make you open to criticism and revision. What I do not accept in Frede's reasoning is his conviction that we can pursue the decidedly historical approach "quite independently of our philosophical views, interests, and standards". To be sure, we can — in one very weak sense of 'can' — do what Frede prescribes, but in another sense we cannot. Frede seems to believe that philosophical texts of the past express themselves in ways in which they want to be interpreted, regardless of the context from which the interpreter stems. This strikes me as misguided : rather, it is our contemporary interests and conceptual tools that are the very things that allow us to give meaning to a past philosophical work and to understand its significance.

Let me give some examples of what I have in mind. For readers familiar with Claude Panaccio's research it suffices to point to his work on the idea of mental language in medieval philosophy, his work on externalism in Ockham's philosophy of mind, and in general his work on Ockham's nominalism. In each of these areas, the questions and conceptual tools of contemporary philosophy help to shed light on past philosophical texts and allow us to see with much more clarity than otherwise the philosophical positions articulated in the later middle ages. Let me add an example pertinent to my own work on medieval philosophy of action. Like some of their modern counterparts, many later medieval philosophers and theologians think that human freedom has something to do with a power to do otherwise. But as anyone familiar with the contemporary free will debate knows, there are many different ways to understand this power to do otherwise and contemporary philosophers explicitly discuss various ways of understanding of such a power. Comparable explicit discussions are mostly absent from medieval texts.[7] However, once we have gotten a hold of the modern philosopher's toolkit it would be foolish not to use it when we ask ourselves, for instance, what Aquinas has in mind when he mentions our power to do otherwise as part of free choice (*liberum arbitrium*). The questions and tools of contemporary philosophy not only can make it easier to understand how an argument from a past philosopher is supposed to work (say, by allowing for more precision in our analysis), they also allow us in many cases to see how different a past approach is from the way we think about a given topic now. However, this insight too is conducive to a better understanding of the history of philosophy. If that is so, then I really doubt whether we can understand a past philosophical position on a given subject if we completely abstract from contemporary philosophical perspectives on it.[8]

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7. John Duns Scotus is an obvious exception. In his discussions of synchronic contingency, he develops a new understanding of the power to do otherwise, and does so by distancing himself from his predecessors. See Stephen D. DUMONT's classic paper "The Origins of Scotus's Theory of Synchronic Contingency", *Modern Schoolman*, 72, 2-3 (1995), p. 149-167. In the criticisms of his account of synchronic contingency by many authors active after his death, we can also detect what looks like a discussion of the power to do otherwise.

8. I think the reason why the history of philosophy is an ongoing and never-finished project lies in some of what I have said here. Take the massive amount of scholarship on Aristotle. No texts of significance have been added to the *Corpus Aristotelicum*, so why are there still books and articles written about Aristotle ? Isn't it now established what Aristotle's philosophical positions were and how he defended them ? A cynic

Ultimately, Frede's idea of a history of philosophy that abstracts from "our philosophical view, interests, and standards" strikes me as being just as stubborn and misguided as the idea that doing good contemporary philosophy means not reading anything from the history of philosophy. To be sure, human life is short and there is only so much any one scholar can achieve. And both approaches have no doubt led to some practical successes : there is good "pure" history of philosophy, and the success of much of modern anglophone philosophy speaks for itself. However, as methods both approaches strike me as foolish.

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When I wrote earlier about the goal or purpose of the history of philosophy and implied that it is to help with questions and problems in contemporary philosophy, I did not mean to say that this is the only or even the primary goal of the history of philosophy. Nor did I want to suggest that this is the goal most worth pursuing in doing history of philosophy. Though it is clearly one goal, I do not wish to deny that we pursue the history of philosophy for other purposes as well — for instance, to gain a better understanding of societies and human endeavours of the past or simply for the sake of knowledge for its own sake. If the engagement with the history of philosophy were directed at contemporary philosophizing as its only goal, then it would be clear why contemporary philosophy matters in the history of philosophy. But note that nothing of my argument for why it is important for the historian of philosophy to look at questions and tools in contemporary philosophy depends on whether or not that is the goal of the history of philosophy. Even if we thought we should do the history of philosophy for its own sake, there is value in not excluding an approach that has at least the promise of providing us with more precision or deeper insight.

In several of his publications on methodology in the history of philosophy, Claude Panaccio mentions what he refers to as "MacIntyre's Dilemma". Here's the dilemma as presented by Alasdair MacIntyre himself :

> Either we read the philosophies of the past so as to make them relevant to our contemporary problems and enterprises, transmuting them as far as possible into what they would have been if they were part of present-day philosophy, and minimizing or ignoring or even on occasion misrepresenting that which refuses such transmutation because it is inextricably bound up with that in the past which makes it radically different from present-day philosophy ; *or* instead we take great care to read them in their own terms, carefully

might respond that scholars are no longer reading each other and their predecessors, and that they are reinventing the wheel and writing for their degrees, promotions, or their own pleasure, but not because there is something objectively new to be said. Some of this is no doubt true, but even if every Aristotle scholar had read everything ever published on Aristotle and all were committed to publishing only new results, there would be — as long as contemporary philosophy continues to make ever finer distinctions and more sophisticated arguments — new books and articles about Aristotle. For there will continue to be new light shed on old and (supposedly) settled issues. This is why philosophy constantly reappropriates its history.

> preserving their idiosyncratic and specific character, so that they cannot emerge into the present except as a set of museum pieces.[9]

Panaccio has his own and more sophisticated way of dealing with this dilemma. As for me, I take issues with both horns of the dilemma. First, it is obviously false that all transmutation into modern terms is a misrepresentation. That the problem of misrepresentation is aligned here explicitly with an approach that intends to bring together contemporary philosophical enterprises with those in the past should give us pause. No doubt some of the reluctance to bring concerns from contemporary philosophy to the study of the history of philosophy is based on the suspicion that doing so necessarily leads to errors, or at least unhelpful interpretations of past philosophers. Yet even if we grant that there is a kind of mistake that arises only from this approach, it does not follow that error is unavoidable. Second, I once more take issue with the familiar thought expressed in the second horn of the dilemma. It presupposes that it is possible to read philosophical works of the past "on their own terms", as if those terms were immediately evident to and shared by all historians of philosophy, and as if using modern conceptual tools could not help us achieve greater precision and deeper insight into what is characteristic of philosophical works and arguments of the past. Moreover, are scholars who pursue the second type of approach mentioned in MacIntyre's dilemma immune to error ?

Assume you are a philosopher and you are interested in the question "What are concepts ?". In light of the contemporary debate (and disagreement) about what concepts are you may find yourself wondering what, say, Aquinas thought about concepts. Approaching Aquinas's works with this question might be extremely illuminating — and also challenging — for two reasons. First, it is clearly interesting what Aquinas has to say about concepts, items that play such an important role in contemporary philosophy of mind. Second, it is highly likely that Aquinas does not think about concepts in the same way as contemporary philosophers do : after all, he lived many hundred years ago, and maybe he doesn't even have a term for what we nowadays refer to as concepts. Whatever the differences, they can show us something about how Aquinas thinks about the mind ; they may even show us something about our contemporary way of thinking about concepts, about the things we take for granted in the philosophy of mind but that shouldn't be taken for granted. The challenges are obvious too. Most importantly, Aquinas didn't write in English, so to begin with, there is a question of what term in his philosophical vocabulary, if any, corresponds to 'concept'. Is it the Latin term *conceptus*, which Aquinas uses relatively rarely and which has other connotations, or do we need to look at the terms *verbum* and *species intelligibilis*, each of which comes with its own problems ? And if we have solved this first question, which may not have an obvious solution, there is the problem of context. We may discover that what we identify as discussions concerning concepts are

9. Alasdair MACINTYRE, "The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past", in Richard RORTY *et al*., ed., *Philosophy in History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 31-48, at p. 31. For PANACCIO's discussion of this dilemma see, for instance, *Récit et reconstruction* and "Grasping the Philosophical Relevance of Past Philosophies", in Jenny PELLETIER, Magali ROQUES, ed., *The Language of Thought in Late Medieval Philosophy. Essays in Honor of Claude Panaccio*, Cham, Springer, 2017, p. 439-451.

found in strange theological contexts, which make us wonder whether there are purely philosophical considerations at play or not, and if so, whether they can be extracted from their contexts. All this is to say that there are huge pitfalls and occasions for failure ; however, what such an approach promises seems to outweigh its risks.[10]

As I hope my last comments indicate, I am not denying that a careful study of the historical setting in which philosophical positions emerged and in which debates were conducted is of the utmost importance. It is necessary to note, to use another example, that medieval discussions about universals took a certain shape, which was determined by the works in which universals came up for discussion. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and Porphyry's *Isagoge*, among other texts, provided commentators not only an occasion to address the ontological status of universals, but also shaped the very questions through which the debate was conducted.[11] Similarly, many late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century debates — about individuation, the will, and the difference between being and essence, to name just a few other examples — are at best partially comprehensible if we don't make the effort to map the lively debate among philosophers and theologians of the time as it was conducted in quodlibetal disputations, *Sentences* commentaries, and other works related to the medieval university.

Still, it is possible that I am too optimistic. Doesn't it follow from what I have been saying that the historian of philosophy must possess superhuman abilities ? Who can master the required ancient and modern languages, know enough about the institutional setting in which philosophy flourished in previous times, be able to read unprinted material, and on top of all that, be an expert in contemporary philosophy ? That seems a tough thing to demand. But I am not saying that the historian of philosophy must show at all times how a philosophical position of the past fits into and perhaps even advances contemporary debates. Like many areas of philosophy, the history of philosophy has become a very complex field that extends to other disciplines. This is a good thing and a bad thing, for the amount of specialization results in a fracturing of the field, but it also makes clear the important point that there has to be a lot of division of labour. This may take some of the sting out of my earlier comments, if there was a sting in the first place. In any case, I hope the picture I have just painted leads, as is the case in Claude Panaccio's *Récit et reconstruction*, to the recognition that there are many different practices historians of philosophy are engaged in, and maybe not all historians of philosophy have to be engaged in all of them. In this sense, conceiving of the history of philosophy as directed towards contemporary philosophy does not mean that every single contribution to the history of philosophy needs to be a contribution to (or influenced by) contemporary philosophy. Some of these contributions may be indirect, but indirect or partial contributions are

10. For an example see Jeffrey E. BROWER, Susan BROWER-TOLAND, "Aquinas on Mental Representation : Concepts and Intentionality", *The Philosophical Review*, 117, 2 (2008), p. 193-243. In my view, the authors go wrong in identifying Aquinas's *species intelligibiles* with concepts, but that doesn't prevent them from making some welcome progress in examining core aspects of Aquinas's philosophy of mind.

11. See Alain de LIBERA, *La querelle des universaux. De Platon à la fin du Moyen Âge*, Paris, Seuil, 1996.

contributions nonetheless, regardless of whether our colleagues have (yet) recognized them as such.