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0521273307 - Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy

Edited by Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner

Excerpt

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## Introduction

Imagine a thousand-volume work entitled *The Intellectual History of Europe*. Imagine also a great convocation of resurrected thinkers, at which every person mentioned in the pages of this work is given a copy and invited to begin by reading the passages concerning himself or herself, and then to read alternately backwards and forwards until he has mastered the full thousand volumes. An ideal work of this title would fulfil the following conditions:

1. The person whose activities and writings are being described finds the description intelligible, except for the parenthetical remarks which say things like 'This was later to be known as . . .' and 'Since the distinction between *X* and *Y* was yet to be drawn, *A*'s use of "*Z*" cannot be interpreted as . . .', and he comes to understand even these remarks as he reads on.
2. On finishing the book, everyone described endorses the description of himself as, though of course insufficiently detailed, at least reasonably accurate and sympathetic.
3. The entire assemblage of the resurrected, at the point at which they have all read through the book, are in as good a position to exchange views, to argue, to engage in collaborative inquiry on subjects of common interest, as secondary sources for their colleagues' works can make them.

This seems a plausible ideal for intellectual history because we hope that such history will give us a sense of Europe as (in the phrase which Gadamer has adapted from Hölderlin) 'the conversation which we are'. We hope that intellectual history will weave a thick enough rope of overlapping beliefs and desires so that we can read our way back through the centuries without ever having to ask 'How could rational men and women have thought (or done) that?' So we think that an ideal *Intellectual History of Europe* should let, e.g., Paracelsus get in touch with Archimedes on the one hand and Boyle on the other. It should put Cicero, Marsilius of Padua, and Bentham in a position to engage in debate. To give up on such hopes, to believe that overlap will fail at crucial points and that 'incommensurability' in some

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sense strong enough to frustrate conversation will occur, is to give up the idea of intellectual progress. Such pessimism must resign itself to regarding 'the history of European thought' as a misleading description of what is in fact a miscellany of self-contained traditions. On this view, we should not attempt intellectual history, for what is needed is something more like a series of ethnographic reports. Such pessimism is characteristic of those who are impressed with how very strange some ways of speaking and acting in the European past have been, and with how very anachronistic (i.e., unintelligible to the figures being described) much intellectual history is.

There has been much debate among both philosophers of science and historians about whether such pessimism is justified – about whether discontinuities, intellectual revolutions, and epistemological ruptures are to be seen merely as places where communication becomes difficult, or as places where it becomes genuinely impossible. We believe that it is not justified, that there are always what have been called 'rational bridgeheads' – not high-level criteria, but rather low-level platitudes – which have made conversation possible across chasms. But for our present purposes we need not insist on this optimism. For we wish to discuss not the question of whether *The Intellectual History of Europe* can be written, but rather the question: supposing it were written, what would be its relation to the history of philosophy?

Such a question would be equally in point if one substituted 'economics' or 'law' or 'morality' or 'the novel' for 'philosophy'. For the lines which demarcate topics or genres or disciplines are not drawn in *The Intellectual History of Europe*. Indeed, the ideal book of this title could not be written unless the issue of whether a certain question was philosophical or scientific or theological, or whether a given problem was one of morals or of manners, had been bracketed. More generally, such a history would have to bracket most questions of reference and of truth. The author of such a history does not care, for purposes of her work, whether Paracelsus was right about sulphur, or Cicero about republics. She only cares about knowing what each would have said in reply to various different sorts of contemporaries, and about facilitating communication between all of them and their ancestors and descendants. Her thousand volumes never take up the question 'What are these people talking about?', much less 'Which ones got it right?' That is why she must write a chronicle rather than a treatise. She is like the literary executrix of an extraordinarily imaginative and productive writer of fantasy – one who has spun an enormously long, rambling, story which must be reconstructed from the writer's letters to friends, memoirs by those friends, jotting on old envelopes, and rejection letters from publishers, as well as from the surviving manuscripts. She must enter the world of the texts, determined to paste together the ideally

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complete version of the fantasy. She must not allow herself to wonder which parts of it were based on real-life characters, nor whether she approves of its moral tone. She does not view herself as writing a story of progress nor of decline, because, for the purposes of her work, she has no views about how the story should come out.

For her readers, however, things are different. They typically read her book as a story of progress – progress in the field of their special interest, or in matters of particular concern to them. (Some, of course, may read it as a story of decline, but they too see the story as having a direction. They care about how it comes out.) Her readers automatically gloss various passages with such phrases as ‘first recognition of the fact that  $p$ ’, ‘first clear grasp of the concept  $C$ ’ and ‘failure to recognize the irrelevance of  $q$  to  $r$ ’. If the reader is a philosopher who is reasonably content with the present state of his discipline he will find himself saying things like ‘Here philosophy separates itself from — and begins to have a history of its own’ or ‘I now realize that the really important figures in the history of philosophy were. . .’. All such judgments are attempts to tie his own views about what is the case into a story about the gradual discovery of these facts, and of the even more gradual discovery of a vocabulary in which one can ask the questions to which his own views are answers.

When a philosopher mines *The Intellectual History of Europe* for materials for a *History of Western Philosophy* his choices will depend not only upon the decade and the country in which he is writing, but on his special interests within philosophy. If he is interested primarily in metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language he will tend to ignore the links of belief and vocabulary which, in *The Intellectual History of Europe*, connect Spinoza and Seneca. He will be more interested in those which link Spinoza with Descartes. If he is concerned primarily with philosophy of religion he will attend to links between Spinoza and Philo, and be less interested in those between Spinoza and Huygens. If he specializes in social philosophy, he will care more about Spinoza’s relation to Hobbes than about his relation to Leibniz.

Spinoza was a nodal point in a web of communications and concerns which cannot easily be mapped on the present organization of intellectual life. Spinoza could not easily have answered the question whether it was his concern with God, or with the state, or with the passions, or with mathematical physics, or with what was later known as ‘the theory of ideas’, which was ‘at the centre of his philosophy’. But the author of a *History of Western Philosophy* needs to ask such questions. He needs to see Spinoza’s writing as organized around certain distinctively philosophical problems, and he needs to separate discussion of these problems from ‘the transient concerns of Spinoza’s day’.

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The task of the author of *The Intellectual History of Europe* was lightened, and indeed made possible, by the fact that she could ignore such questions. In her book, Spinoza is not described as ‘a philosopher’ as opposed to ‘a scientist’ or ‘a renegade rabbi’, nor as ‘a rationalist’ nor as ‘a panpsychist’. She mentions such terms without using them. The measure of her tact, and thus of the extent to which her work approaches the ideal, consists largely in her use of quotation marks. Her book is of no help in constructing a grid which will put him in his proper place – which will show, for example, that he was or was not a ‘great philosopher’.

To construct such a grid – to construct criteria for answering such questions as ‘Should we include Spinoza (or, to take more debatable cases, Montaigne or Emerson) among the philosophers?’, ‘among the *great* philosophers?’ – is to have a view about the relation of intellectual history to the way things really are. For the idea of a ‘proper place’ requires a relatively closed intellectual world – a determinate lay-out of reality, and thus of the problems which reality poses to the inquiring mind. It requires that one know quite a bit about how the world (not just the world of stars and plants and mud, but that of poems and moral dilemmas and politics as well) divides up into areas and problems – solved or unsolved. The author of *The Intellectual History of Europe* has to pretend not to know the way the world is.

One might be tempted to put the difference between our ideal intellectual historian and the author of a *History of Western Philosophy* by saying that she is concerned with the meanings of past utterances whereas he is concerned with their truth and importance as well. She is concerned with the pattern of use of terms, he with the relation of that use to the way the physical and moral worlds actually are. But this way of putting the matter can be, and has been, very misleading. For it suggests that he can take her word for what a given sentence means, and then confront that meaning with the facts. But it is not clear that *The Intellectual History of Europe* tells you what the sentences of the past meant. To read through the ideal version of this book (updated through last year) would indeed put the would-be historian of philosophy in the best possible position to assign a meaning to a sentence in a text from the past. But that is like saying that years of living among, and bickering with, a tribe, puts the anthropologist in the best possible position to translate their sentences. So it does, but he may have a lot of further work to do before being able to actualize this capacity. It is one thing to fall in with another’s language-game and another to translate her language into yours. Similarly, it is one thing to have mastered *The Intellectual History of Europe* and another thing to know how to put one of the sentences quoted in it in a form which allows confrontation with the way the world is.

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This gap exists just insofar as the vocabulary used in the sentence strikes us moderns as an inconvenient, awkward way of describing the world, or of stating the problems to be addressed. We are then tempted to say things like ‘Well, if you take it as meaning *p*, then it’s of course true, and indeed trivial, but if you take it as meaning *q*, then. . .’ Your reading of *The Intellectual History of Europe* does not, *by itself*, help you know which way to take it. For although that book lets you know what the original inscriber of the sentence would have said he meant, what he would have said to a whole range of questions from his contemporaries about the kind of speech-act he was performing and about its expected audience and impact, all this information is of little use in choosing between interpreting the sentence, for purposes of confrontation with reality, as *p* or as *q*. ‘*P*’ and ‘*q*’ are sentences of *our* language, convenient and elegant sentences designed to fit the contours of the world as we know it to be. The predicates they contain pick out kinds of things into which we know the world to be divided (e.g., stars and galaxies, prudence and morality). The fluency in awkward and inconvenient ways of talking given by a thorough acquaintance with *The Intellectual History of Europe* does little to let one know which of these elegant alternatives to prefer.

It is tempting to pose the question of whether the meaning, or the reference, or both, of the terms used in such a sentence have changed between its author’s time and our own. But it is not clear that this question needs to be asked by either sort of historian. Recent discussion of such questions by philosophers of science and philosophers of language was, to be sure, inspired by problems encountered in the historiography of the natural sciences. But although such discussion has served to broaden and deepen the range of considerations and examples thought relevant within philosophical semantics, it has not produced results which have made historians clearer about their tasks or methods. Nor does it seem likely to do so in the future. For although it was the history of science which engendered many current disputes about meaning and reference, these disputes have now become sufficiently remote from the practice of interpretation as to make it dubious that historians should expect anything like a ‘theory of interpretation’ to eventuate. Neither the controversy between Gadamer and Betti about the objectivity of interpretation, nor that between Charles Taylor and Mary Hesse about the distinction between *Geistes-* and the *Naturwissenschaften*, nor that between Davidson and Dummett concerning holism in semantics, nor those concerning the viability of a causal theory of reference, seem likely to tell the would-be historian of philosophy more than he already knows about how to mine *The Intellectual History of Europe* for the raw material he needs. The thousand volumes he has read have told him all there is to know about the

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changes in the *uses* of the terms in which he is interested. He may be forgiven for saying that he does not care how, on the basis of those uses, semantics proceeds to distribute meaning and reference.

Rather than ‘philosophical foundations of the practice of interpretation’, what such an historian needs is a sense of when it is permissible to simply filter out the sentences for which such problems of interpretation seem insoluble and confine himself to those sentences where a translation into the modern idiom can be hammered out, and fitted neatly together with translations of other sentences. Such a translation will, typically, not be word-for-word, but it may nevertheless be quite straightforward. The anthropologist often has to say things like ‘What he *said* was “The other white god died because he quarrelled with the spirit inhabiting the *mburi*”, but what he *meant* was that Pogson-Smith died because, like an idiot, he’d eaten some of those berries over there.’ The historian of philosophy often has to say things like ‘What Kant *said* was “This thoroughgoing identity of the apprehension of a manifold which is given in intuition contains a synthesis of representation and is possible only through the consciousness of this synthesis. . .” but what he *meant* was that, however primitive and disorderly the experience is supposed to be, if it is accompanied by self-consciousness then it will have to admit of at least that degree of intellectual organization which is involved in one’s being able to claim one’s past mental states as one’s own.’\* By filtering out certain sentences as irrelevant to his concerns, and to the concerns the author himself would have had if he had known more about how the world is, while giving a sympathetic rendering of the remainder, the historian of philosophy helps the dead philosopher put his act together for a new audience.

Such filtering and paraphrasing produces a history which is nothing like a selection of passages from *The Intellectual History of Europe*. But it obviously has to be done if one is going to have a history ‘of philosophy’ or ‘of the mind–body problem’ or ‘of empiricism’ or ‘of secular morality’. To say that such histories are anachronistic is true but pointless. They are *supposed* to be anachronistic. The anthropologist is not doing his job if he merely offers to teach us how to bicker with his favorite tribe, how to be initiated into their rituals, etc. What we want to be told is whether that tribe has anything interesting to tell us – interesting by *our* lights, answering to *our* concerns, informative about what *we* know to exist. Any anthropologist who rejected this assignment on the grounds that filtering and paraphrase would distort and betray the integrity of the tribe’s culture

\* The double-quoted sentence beginning ‘This thoroughgoing identity’ comes from Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B.113. The portion of the sentence after ‘What he *meant* was’ is taken from Jonathan Bennett, *Kant’s Analytic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 119.

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would no longer be an anthropologist, but a sort of cultist. He is, after all, working for *us*, not for *them*. Similarly, the historian of *X*, where *X* is something we know to be real and important, is working for those of us who share that knowledge, not for our unfortunate ancestors who did not.

Someone who wishes to write *A History of Western Philosophy* must, therefore, either deny that contemporary philosophy is something real and important (in which case he will write the history of philosophy as one might write the history of witchcraft), or else proceed to filter out the sentences which are not worth translating, while being conscientiously anachronistic in translating the remainder. Most such writers do a bit of both, for most of them despair of making a coherent story out of *all* the texts which one or another contemporary philosophical school calls 'philosophical'. A coherent story will be one which shows some of these texts to be central and others peripheral, some to be genuinely philosophical and others merely pseudo-philosophical (or only tangentially and momentarily philosophical). The historian of philosophy is going to have to have views about whether, for example, moral philosophy is central and epistemology relatively peripheral to the subject, or the converse. He will also have to have views about which schools or movements within contemporary philosophy count as 'genuine' or 'important' philosophy. It is because of disagreements on these matters that historians of philosophy occlude texts which are highlighted by their rivals. Each historian of philosophy is working for an 'us' which consists, primarily, of those who see the contemporary philosophical scene as he does. So each will treat in a 'witchcraft' manner what another will treat as the antecedents of something real and important in contemporary philosophy.

From the description we have given, it might seem that the intellectual historian and the historian of philosophy are doing such different jobs that they can hardly be thought of as producing two species of a single genus called 'history'. Such doubts about what his or her counterpart is doing are, indeed, voiced by both. Thus the historian of philosophy may dismiss the intellectual historian as a mere antiquarian. She, in turn, may dismiss him as a mere propagandist – someone rewriting the past for the benefit of a faction in the present. He may think of her as uninterested in philosophical truth, and she may think of him as uninterested in historical truth. Such exchanges of recriminations have led to attempts to wrest the history of philosophy out of the hands of the intellectual historians, and counter-attempts to reinstate intellectual history by arguing that the first duty of the historian is to avoid anachronism. Sometimes it is suggested that we must develop a third genre – a happy medium, more philosophical than *The Intellectual History of Europe* and more historically accurate than any known or currently imaginable *History of Western Philosophy*.

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We do not wish to suggest an attempt of either sort, nor to suggest that a third genre is needed. An opposition between intellectual historians and historians of philosophy seems to us as factitious as would an opposition between scientists and engineers, or librarians and scholars, or rough-hewers and shapers. It is an appearance created by the attempt to be sententious about 'the nature of history' or 'the nature of philosophy' or both, treating 'history' and 'philosophy' as names of natural kinds – disciplines whose subject and purpose are familiar and uncontroversial. Such attempts produce red-faced snortings about how a given book 'isn't what I call history' or 'doesn't count as philosophy'. They take for granted that there is a well-known part of the world – the past – which is the domain of history, and another well-known part, usually thought of as a set of 'timeless problems', which is the domain of philosophy.

There is nothing wrong with saying that 'history gives us the truth about the past' except triviality. Pseudo-problems arise, however, when one tries to make a distinction between knowing about the relation of the past to the present and knowing about the past in itself. These are special cases of the more general pseudo-problem raised when one tries to make a distinction between knowing about the relation of reality to our minds, languages, interests and purposes and knowing about reality as it is in itself. These are pseudo-problems because there is no contrast to be drawn between knowing about *X* and knowing about the relations between *X* and *Y*, *Z*, etc. There is nothing to be known about *X* save how to describe it in a language which will exhibit its relations to *Y*, *Z*, etc. The idea of 'the truth about the past, uncontaminated by present perspectives or concerns' is like the idea of 'real essence, uncontaminated by the preconceptions and concerns built into any human language'. It is a romantic ideal of purity which has no relation to any actual inquiry which human beings have undertaken or could undertake.

The idea of 'sticking to the philosophical problems and eschewing anti-quarianism' is less absurd than that of 'sticking to the past and eschewing its relation to the present' only because it is possible simply to enumerate what will count as 'the philosophical problems', whereas it is not possible to point to 'the past'. One can, in other words, delimit something for 'philosophy' to name by being fairly specific about what will count and what will not, but one cannot delimit something for 'history' to name by gesturing over one's shoulder. 'Philosophy' is a sufficiently flexible term so that no one is greatly surprised when a philosopher announces that half of the previous canon of 'great philosophers' must be thrown out because the problems of philosophy have been discovered to be different than had previously been thought. Such a philosopher usually explains that the slack will be taken up by something else ('religion' or 'science' or 'literature').



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But this very flexibility is the reason why it is hopeless to say something general and interesting about the relation between philosophy and history.

There is, however, something to be said about the relation between books which can most easily be seen as chunks of *The Intellectual History of Europe* and books which think of themselves as offering all, or a chunk of, the history of Western philosophy. The first thing to say is that our previous description of these two genres has been a description of two impossibly ideal types. Our intellectual historian who has no interest in how the story comes out and our historian of philosophy who knows perfectly well what philosophy is, and can tell a central philosophical problem from a peripheral one or from a non-philosophical one at a glance, are caricatures. But we have tried to make them sympathetic caricatures, for we see both as limiting cases of efforts which are altogether praiseworthy, equally indispensable to the health of the republic of letters. Each of these efforts is led, on occasion, to caricature itself – but this is the sort of self-caricature which an honest devotion to a worthy aim can easily induce.

There will never be such a book as *The Intellectual History of Europe*, not only because the ideal we have specified could never be attained in a mere thousand (or million) volumes, but because – such is the size of our brains and the span of our lives – anybody who had read or written a few of these volumes would not be able to read or write most of the others. The simple fact that any historian has got to start by being selective – by singling out some texts as central and relegating others to footnotes – is enough to disabuse us of the ideal that we have set up. The thought that descriptions of political discourse in twelfth-century France, metaphysics in nineteenth-century Germany, and painting in fifteenth-century Urbino, might some day flow together to create the seamless tapestry which would be our ideal *Intellectual History of Europe* is an elevating one. But it is the idea of a book written by no human hand.

Since every book on such topics will be conditioned by the author's sense of relevance, a sense determined by everything she knows – not just the things she knows about her period but by everything she knows about everything – no such work will fit seamlessly together with works on flanking periods or topics written a generation earlier or a generation later. No intellectual historian can avoid the kind of selectivity which automatically results from an awareness of present-day science, theology, philosophy and literature. Intellectual history cannot be written by people who are illiterate in the culture of their prospective readers, for it is one thing to bracket questions of truth and reference and another not to know when such questions arise. To put present-day readers in touch with a past figure is precisely to be able to say such things as 'This was later to be known as . . .' and 'Since the distinction between *X* and *Y* was yet to be drawn, *A*'s

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use of “Z” cannot be interpreted as. . .’ But knowing when to say such things – knowing what to bracket when – requires knowing what has been going on recently in all sorts of areas.

Just as the need to select means that the intellectual historian could not ignore the philosophy of her own day when writing about Spinoza even if she wanted to, so the need to write about Spinoza (rather than merely about what one would be saying were one now to utter one of Spinoza’s sentences) means that the historian of philosophy cannot ignore intellectual history. Nor, of course, does he ever do so for long. The pose such historians sometimes affect – ‘Well, let’s see whether the old boy got anything right’ – is only a pose, and always short-lived. One cannot figure out whether Spinoza got anything right before figuring out what he was talking about. Since Spinoza himself may not have known what he *was* talking about when he wrote a given sentence (because he was so confused about what the world really is like) one will not know how to map his sentence on to the world as we now know it to be without reading lots and lots of those sentences in the hermeneutic, reconstructive, charitable ways characteristic of intellectual historians. No matter how philistine the historian of philosophy may want to be, he will need translations of what Spinoza wrote which will let him get a handle on the truth-value of Spinoza’s sentences. This will require him to examine present translations critically to see whether they are infected with the philosophies of some intervening epoch, and eventually to work out his own translations. He will become an historical scholar and re-translator whether he wants to or not. He will find himself driven to read the treatments of Spinoza’s intellectual environment in the works of intellectual historians in order to know how to translate, just as the intellectual historian will, consciously or unconsciously, derive her sense of what is worth translating from contemporary philosophical movements.

So the result of constructing these two ideal types, and seeing that they are *merely* ideal, is the realization that there cannot be a nice clear-cut division of functions between intellectual history and the history of philosophy. Rather, each genre will continually be correcting and updating the other. Another way to put this moral is to say that we might do well to forget the bugbears of ‘anachronism’ and ‘antiquarianism’. If to be anachronistic is to link a past *X* to a present *Y* rather than studying it in isolation, then every historian is always anachronistic. In practice, the charge of anachronism means that a past *X* has been related to a contemporary *Y* rather than, as it might better have been, to a contemporary *Z*. It is always a matter of selecting among contemporary concerns with which to associate *X*, not a matter of abjuring such concerns. Without some selecting, the historian is reduced to duplicating the texts which constitute