Introduction: The uses of the past

Quine is said to have joked that "there are two sorts of people interested in philosophy, those interested in philosophy and those interested in the history of philosophy."[1] Though we might bristle at Quine's joke, it makes a straight-forward point: that there is a difference between trying to solve contemporary philosophical problems and trying to understand the philosophers of the past. Doing philosophy and studying its history are separate enterprises, and they must be carefully distinguished.[2] During the last several decades, however, doing so has become more difficult, as it has become common for philosophers to speak of a third enterprise that must be distinguished both from doing philosophy and from studying its history. This enterprise is called *doing philosophy historically*. Doing philosophy historically involves more than just doing philosophy, since not every attempt to solve philosophical problems does so by engaging with thinkers from the past. We can try to solve philosophical problems in non-historical ways – through conceptual analysis or the study of ordinary language, for example. Doing philosophy historically also involves more than simply studying the history of philosophy, since not every attempt to understand the thinkers of the past is also an attempt to solve contemporary philosophical problems. We can try to understand what Aristotle or Aquinas said without asking whether what they said is true, rational, or relevant to our own concerns. Doing philosophy historically is a hybrid: an attempt to gain philosophical understanding *through* or *by means of* an engagement with philosophy's past. It takes the study of history to be a philosophical method, and a method that offers a kind of illumination that is

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[1] Quoted in Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Relationship of Philosophy to its Past," in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 39–40.

[2] Of course, many philosophers have maintained that these enterprises are ultimately *not* distinct, and that it is impossible to do philosophy properly without studying its past. Charles Taylor calls this view "the historical thesis about philosophy," and attributes it to Hegel and Heidegger, among others. See Charles Taylor, "Philosophy and its History," in *Philosophy in History*, 18. Both the historical thesis and Taylor's view of it are discussed at length in Chapter 3.

difficult or perhaps impossible to gain in any other way. This much seems clear. But the matters of what it means to do philosophy historically, and of what sort of illumination this enterprise offers, are much less clear.

This book asks what it means to do philosophy historically. It explains what we are doing when we try to do philosophy by engaging with its past. The book describes how this enterprise differs from doing philosophy in a non-historical way, on the one hand, and from traditional scholarship in the history of philosophy on the other. I want to show that doing philosophy historically differs from these enterprises in a number of ways. It has a distinctive *object*: it studies a different sort of thing than they do. It also employs a distinctive *method* and has a different set of *goals*. The aim of this book, then, is to understand the nature of the activity that we call doing philosophy historically, and to describe this activity's distinguishing features. But the book will not just study this activity in the abstract. It will also look closely at some examples of this activity. It will conduct a series of case studies of figures who *do* philosophy historically: Alasdair MacIntyre, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Ricoeur. Each, I argue, embodies a different strategy for doing philosophy historically. Each has a distinctive approach to the business of learning philosophical lessons by engaging with the thinkers of the past. As a result, each has something important to teach us about this enterprise: how it works in practice, what challenges it faces, and what is involved in doing it well. I hope that, by drawing attention to the importance of this enterprise for MacIntyre, Heidegger, and Ricoeur, I will shed new light on an important but neglected side of their work, and thus help to see these figures in a new way.

THE HISTORY OF A LABEL

There is nothing new about the practice of doing philosophy historically. For as long as there have been philosophers, they have looked to earlier thinkers for help in answering their own questions. And for as long as there have been philosophers, they have found it useful to advance their views through discussions of their predecessors. Aristotle is a classic example. In Book One of the *Metaphysics*, he begins his inquiry into the first principles of things by surveying what earlier thinkers have said about the topic. This survey is not just a sign of respect or a rhetorical device. Aristotle's survey of his predecessors helps shape his own views, and his conclusions emerge from his discussion of them.[3]

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[3] For example, Aristotle's insistence on "distinguishing the many senses in which things are said to exist" emerges from his discussion of the difficulties in Plato's ontology. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Volume II, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1568–1569.

Another well-known example is Aquinas. Not only does Aquinas's "sacred doctrine" seek to fuse two extant bodies of knowledge (Aristotelianism and Christian revelation); he often presents his own views through commentaries on earlier thinkers. But while the practice of doing philosophy historically is not new, recent decades have seen a surge in the use of the label. Since the mid 1980s, there has been a sharp increase in the number of books and articles that talk about "doing philosophy historically," and that try to distinguish this enterprise from related ones. Peter Hare, for example, has edited a collection of essays entitled *Doing Philosophy Historically*;[4] recent books by Richard Campbell,[5] Bernard Dauenhauer,[6] and Jorge Gracia[7] also use the label extensively. The practice that these philosophers describe is not new, but their interest in talking about and understanding it seems to be.

There seem to be several reasons for this surge in interest. One is that recent decades have seen the publication of a number of influential books that cannot be comfortably labeled either "philosophy" or "history of philosophy." These books often look like pieces of traditional historical scholarship: attempts to understand and explain the views of important figures in the history of philosophy. On closer inspection, however, they prove to be less concerned with explaining the figure's views accurately than with using the figure to advance an original agenda. Jonathan Bennett's book *A Study of Spinoza's* Ethics[8] and Henry Veatch's book *Aristotle: A Contemporary Introduction*[9] are two well-known examples of this tendency. They are not simply studies in the history of philosophy; nor are they simply non-historical pieces of original philosophy. They contain elements of both, and as a result, they have been described as attempts to "do philosophy historically." A similar reception has greeted a number of works of so-called "continental" philosophy. During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of French and German works that used historical studies to advance original views appeared in English translation for the first time. Examples include Heidegger's lectures on Nietzsche and Derrida's deconstructive readings of figures such as Plato and Hegel.[10] Like Bennett's and Veatch's work,

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[4] Peter Hare (ed.), *Doing Philosophy Historically* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1988).
[5] Richard Campbell, *Truth and Historicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[6] Bernard Dauenhauer (ed.), *At the Nexus of Philosophy and History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).
[7] Jorge Gracia, *Philosophy and its History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).
[8] Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's* Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
[9] Henry Veatch, *Aristotle: A Contemporary Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974).
[10] Chapter 5 gives a more detailed discussion of Heidegger's lectures on Nietzsche. On Derrida's readings of Plato and Hegel, see, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

4   *Introduction: The uses of the past*

these texts are not simply pieces of original philosophy, nor are they simply
scholarly studies in the history of philosophy. They advance original phil-
osophical claims, but they do so by engaging with earlier thinkers. So
English-speaking readers have come to describe them as books that "do
philosophy historically." These developments may not be the only reasons
for the surge of interest in this label, but they seem to have contributed to its
popularity.

But while this label is now widely used, its meaning is far from clear.
Many philosophers acknowledge that this enterprise exists, but few give
explicit, detailed accounts of what it is and how it works. Even philosophers
who write about the enterprise rarely try to define it. Those who do give
definitions tend to give vague ones. Hare, for example, defines it as the view
that posing philosophical questions and studying philosophy's past are both
instrumentally valuable as well as intrinsically so.[11] Each activity is worth
doing for its own sake, but each also helps us to do the other better. Doing
philosophy makes us better at understanding the work of earlier thinkers;
learning about these thinkers in turn makes us better philosophers.[12] But
while this definition seems true enough, it is frustratingly vague. *How* does
doing philosophy help us understand the thinkers of the past? How does
knowing about the philosophers of the past make us better philosophers?
Hare does not answer these questions. But until we do, we will not under-
stand what it means to do philosophy historically. Another problem is that
the label "doing philosophy historically" is used in a wide variety of ways,
some of which have little in common. Gracia, for example, uses it to refer to
any attempt to derive assistance for one's own philosophical work from the
thinkers of the past. This includes strategies as diverse as treating the past as
"a source of inspiration,"[13] or as "a source of information and truth,"[14] or
even as a source of "therapy."[15] Campbell, by contrast, uses the term more
narrowly. He defines it as the search for "self-recognition"[16] in the past. In
studying past philosophers, "one recognizes elements of one's own way of
thinking in the past, and recognizes them *as one's own*."[17] We thereby come
to understand ourselves and our thoughts better. No doubt there is a great
deal that is true here. But again, the question of just how historical insight
helps to make us better philosophers remains unanswered. If the term
"doing philosophy historically" is to be of any value, we need to move

[11] Hare, "Introduction." *Doing Philosophy Historically*, 14
[12] Hare, "Introduction." *Doing Philosophy Historically*, 14.   [13] Gracia, *Philosophy and its History*, 140.
[14] Gracia, *Philosophy and its History*, 146.   [15] Gracia, *Philosophy and its History*, 148.
[16] Campbell, *Truth and Historicity*, 10.   [17] Campbell, *Truth and Historicity*, 10.

beyond the current discussions. We need to explain what this enterprise is, and precisely how it differs from related ones. We need to understand its goals, its methods, and its distinctive value. Finally, we need to study the enterprise in action, by looking closely at its practitioners. This book will try to do all of these things.

THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book can be divided into two parts, a theoretical part and a practical part. The first three chapters present the theory. Chapter 1 gives a general account of what it means to do philosophy historically. It argues that in order to see how history can help us philosophize, we must understand the special kind of instruction that historical inquiry offers. History, I claim, helps us understand the natures of things that are essentially developmental. Studying what a thing *has* done shows us what it *can* do. Accordingly, I argue that doing philosophy historically involves tracing the development of what might be called *philosophical pictures*: extremely general conceptions of what the world is like and how we fit into it. Chapter 1 also explains what pictures are, and how they differ from the philosophical theories with which we tend to be more familiar.

Chapter 2 adds detail to this account. It explains *how* we do philosophy historically: how we learn about a picture's capabilities by tracing its development. It argues that we do so by constructing a specific sort of narrative, one that triggers a shift in our way of seeing the philosophers of the past. I make sense of this shift by drawing on the notion of "seeing as." Chapter 2 further argues that the narratives we construct while doing philosophy historically are a sort of argument, and that their construction is a rational pursuit, as well as a pursuit that aims at truth. This pursuit does, however, show that our views of argumentation, rationality, and truth need to be broadened.

Chapter 3 asks whether it is *necessary* to do philosophy historically. It connects this question to a longstanding debate about how philosophy is related to its past. Over the past two centuries, many philosophers have claimed that their discipline is inherently historical, but they have had a difficult time explaining what this means. I propose that their claims are best seen as reminders of the importance of doing philosophy historically. In addition to proposing detailed answers to specific theoretical questions, philosophers should be concerned with the development of our more general pictures of reality. Chapter 3 contends that there is good reason to think that doing philosophy historically is necessary – even though it turns out to be remarkably difficult to advance a formal argument for this claim.

Having sketched the theory, I turn to the case studies. Each of the next three chapters examines a figure who does philosophy historically, and who illustrates a specific way of engaging in this enterprise. Chapter 4 deals with Alasdair MacIntyre, who adopts what I call a *critical* approach to doing philosophy historically. MacIntyre traces the development of a picture called the enlightenment project, a picture that he thinks involves an untenable way of understanding morality and practical reason. MacIntyre also uses historical study to develop an alternative to the enlightenment project. Chapter 4 examines MacIntyre's critique of the enlightenment project in *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. It contends that we cannot understand MacIntyre's project unless we see that its key arguments are historical through and through.

Chapter 5 deals with Martin Heidegger, who adopts what I call a *diagnostic* approach to doing philosophy historically. Whereas MacIntyre sets out to criticize a picture that governs our thinking, Heidegger seeks to discover the true natures of several pictures that are deceptive. Heidegger contends that the West has long been dominated by a group of related pictures that he calls Platonism, metaphysics, and onto-theology. He further argues that these pictures have never been properly understood, and that as a result, their effects have gone unnoticed. Chapter 5 examines Heidegger's use of the diagnostic approach in his readings of Plato, Nietzsche, and Hegel. It argues that these readings should not be seen as pieces of conventional scholarship in the history of philosophy, since Heidegger is less concerned with the theories these philosophers advance than with the pictures of reality they articulate.

Chapter 6 discusses Paul Ricoeur, who does philosophy historically in a way that is *synthetic*. Rather than criticizing or diagnosing, Ricoeur fuses the resources of two pictures that he finds attractive but problematic: those articulated in the work of Kant and Hegel. The result is what Ricoeur calls his post-Hegelian Kantianism, an approach to philosophy that tries to remedy the limitations of both thinkers by reading them in light of each other. Chapter 6 examines Ricoeur's use of the synthetic approach in his discussions of the self, the world, and God. His work on these topics uses the past to advance a contemporary agenda, offering an especially clear example of how history can help us philosophize.

Finally, in a concluding section entitled "Consequences," I ask what all of this shows about philosophy. What can we learn about the discipline from the fact that it may be done historically? I argue that this fact teaches us something important about the relation between philosophy and the rest of

the humanities, and about the standards of excellence used to assess phil-
osophical work. It also shows something important about philosophy's
value and its place in the wider culture. In short, seeing that philosophy is
the sort of thing that may be done historically helps deepen our under-
standing of the discipline as a whole.

Let me add a word about the status of this book. The book distinguishes
three enterprises: philosophy, the history of philosophy, and doing philos-
ophy historically. It explains what the third enterprise is, and how it differs
from the other two. But what status does the explanation itself have? To
which enterprise does it belong? First and foremost, this book is a piece of
philosophy. It asks a specific question, and it answers that question by
constructing an equally specific theory. In some ways, it is a very conven-
tional piece of philosophy, since it tries to clarify the meaning of a concept:
the concept "doing philosophy historically." It may seem odd that a
discussion of doing philosophy historically does not itself proceed histor-
ically. I hope this fact will seem less strange once I have explained how the
enterprise differs from other sorts of philosophical work. For now, suffice it
to say that engaging in an activity is clearly not the same thing as under-
standing that activity through philosophical reflection. We do not find it
strange that the philosophy of religion is not itself a part of religion, or that
the philosophy of biology is not a part of biology. By the same token, it is
one thing to do philosophy historically, and another to explain what it
means to do so. This book is engaged in the latter enterprise.

But in other ways, matters are not so simple. This book does not simply
try to clarify a concept or solve a philosophical problem. It also contains
elements of the other activities I have mentioned: studying the history of
philosophy, and doing philosophy historically. It engages in history of
philosophy to the extent that it tries to situate itself, however cursorily,
with respect to the past. At the beginning of this introduction, I noted that
philosophers since Aristotle have studied earlier thinkers in the hope of
advancing their own agendas. I also noted that philosophers have become
much more interested in this practice during the last several decades, but
that they have not given a satisfactory account of its nature. These are all
straightforward historical claims, claims that could appear in any conven-
tional history of philosophy. Similar claims appear later in the book. In
Chapter 3, for example, I ask whether it is necessary to do philosophy
historically. I suggest that it is, but note that the only really compelling
argument we could give for this claim would be a sweeping historical
narrative. I do not give such a narrative myself, though my position seems
to call for one. In this respect as well, my project is closely connected with

traditional historical scholarship, even as it seeks to do something quite different. There is a larger lesson here. If a book such as this one can belong primarily to one enterprise while containing elements of the other two, then the boundaries separating these activities cannot be perfectly sharp. This does not mean there are no important differences among doing philosophy, studying its history, and doing philosophy historically. But in practice, these activities may intermingle. A particular work may contain elements of all three.

There is a final respect in which this book blurs the lines between activities. One of the book's central claims is that when we do philosophy historically, we seek to trigger a change in our way of seeing thinkers from the past. The information we have about these thinkers may not change. What changes is what we see them *as*. I would be happy if this book triggered a similar change in the way we look at philosophy. I would like to persuade my readers to see philosophy as concerned with more than the solutions to highly technical problems, and to see the history of philosophy as more than a repository for outdated views. The methods of this book may be primarily philosophical. But its goal – or at any rate, its hope – is to broaden our conception of what philosophy is.

CHAPTER I

Doing philosophy historically

This chapter explains what it means to do philosophy historically. It gives an account of this enterprise's goals and methods, one that distinguishes it both from the practice of philosophy more narrowly construed and from the study of the history of philosophy. It also investigates the value of this activity. It explains what kind of illumination it offers, and why this illumination is worth seeking. To this end, I first examine a number of current views about what is involved in doing philosophy historically, and explain why I find them inadequate. Next, I raise the question of what kind of understanding is gained through the study of history – any kind of history. I do so by drawing on John Herman Randall's discussion of the "genetic method."[1] I then extend Randall's discussion of the genetic method to the case of philosophy, and explain how a study of past philosophy might teach philosophical lessons. Finally, since my discussion relies heavily on the notion of a *philosophical picture*, I end the chapter by clarifying this notion's meaning and defending its use.

CURRENT VIEWS

It is not difficult to describe the enterprise of doing philosophy historically in very general terms. Imagine two ideal types: the pure philosopher and the pure historian of philosophy. The pure philosopher is interested solely in "doing" philosophy – that is, in discovering the answers to contemporary philosophical questions. She may want to know whether uncaused free action is possible or moral values objective, for example. She may not be particularly interested in the history of earlier attempts to answer these questions. She simply wants to know the answers, and she may not think that a familiarity with the history of her questions will help her find them.

[1] John Herman Randall, *Nature and Historical Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 63.

Indeed, the pure philosopher may suspect that paying too much attention to this history will lead her away from the answers she seeks. After all, if earlier philosophers had succeeded in answering the questions that vex her, then surely these questions would no longer be asked. The work of earlier philosophers may be interesting in its own right, and studying it may be a good exercise for students, but according to the pure philosopher, there is no reason to think that it will help us to solve philosophical problems. To fail to see this is to lapse into antiquarianism.[2]

The pure historian of philosophy, on the other hand, is interested solely in understanding the work of philosophers from the past. He wants to know what their views were, and to understand these views in their own terms – to determine whether Spinoza was a pantheist, what Plato thought about mathematical entities, and so on. Understanding what these philosophers really thought, he claims, is quite different from using their work to advance contemporary philosophical agendas. No doubt a clever reader can make Spinoza say interesting things about our contemporary ecological crisis, or make Plato say interesting things about the state of literary theory. But the pure historian of philosophy is concerned with what Spinoza and Plato really thought, and he doubts whether such appropriations help us to discover this. Whereas the pure philosopher fears antiquarianism, the pure historian of philosophy fears anachronism. To understand the great figures from the history of philosophy, he insists, is to understand them as they understood themselves, not to translate their work into contemporary idioms they would not recognize.

We might provisionally say that those who do philosophy historically take neither the pure philosopher nor the pure historian of philosophy as their ideal. They reject the division between doing philosophy and studying its history, between solving contemporary problems and trying to understand philosophers from the past. They maintain, as Peter Hare puts it, that a philosopher can "at once make a contribution to the solution of current philosophical problems and a contribution to the history of thought."[3] They claim that one can do philosophy *by* studying its history – that an engagement with the history of philosophy can contribute to the solution of contemporary philosophical problems. In the most general terms, then, we might say that to do philosophy historically is to reject the assumptions of

[2] The term "antiquarianism" is used by Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner. See their introduction to *Philosophy in History*, 10. They oppose it to "anachronism," a term I use below.
[3] Hare, "Introduction." *Doing Philosophy Historically*, 12.