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Edited by

JON MILLER
Queen's University

BRAD INWOOD
University of Toronto

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Notes on Contributors

Donald C. Ainslie is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. His special interests include David Hume and the history of modern philosophy, as well as naturalism in ethics and the foundations of bioethics.

Gail Fine is Professor of Philosophy at Cornell University. She works on various aspects of ancient philosophy, as well as epistemology and metaphysics. Her *On Ideas: Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Theory of Forms* was published in 1993.

Brad Inwood is Professor of Classics at the University of Toronto. He is the editor of the *Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* and author of *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (1985).

Terence Irwin is Susan Linn Sage Professor of Philosophy at Cornell University. He has published several influential books on ancient philosophy (including *Plato's Ethics* 1995 and *Aristotle's First Principles* 1988). He also works on Kant and the history of ethics.

A. A. Long is Professor of Classics and the Irving Stone Professor of Humanities at UC Berkeley. His interests include ancient literature and philosophy, with special emphasis on Stoicism. His most recent book (2002) is *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life.*

Stephen Menn is Associate Professor of Philosophy at McGill University. He works on ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophy, and on the history and philosophy of mathematics. His most recent book is *Descartes and Augustine* (1998).

Jon Miller is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario). His interests include ancient and early modern philosophy, as well as the history of ethics and modal theory.

Phillip Mitsis is Professor of Classics at New York University. His interests include ancient philosophy and its impact on the early modern period, as well as ancient Greek literature. His *Epicurus' Ethical Theory* was published in 1988.

Steven Nadler is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He has published several books on early modern philosophy, in particular *Spinoza: A Life* (1999) and *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (2002).

Margaret J. Osler is Professor of History and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at the University of Calgary. She works, among various fields, on the history of early modern science. Her *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy: Gassendi and Descartes on Contingency and Necessity in the Created World* was published in 1994.

Donald Rutherford is Professor of Philosophy at UC San Diego. He works primarily on early modern philosophy. His *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature* was published in 1995.

J. B. Schneewind is Professor of Philosophy at the John Hopkins University and a specialist in the history of ethics in the modern period. His *The Invention of Autonomy* was published in 1998.

Catherine Wilson is Professor of Philosophy at the University of British Columbia. Her special interests include philosophy and science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Her *The Invisible World: Early Modern Philosophy and the Invention of the Microscope 1620–1720* was published in 1995.

Introduction

J. B. Schneewind

The great covered cisterns of Istanbul were built during the sixth century of the common era. Their roofs are held up by row upon row of stone pillars. Many of these pillars were made specially for the cisterns, but others seem to have been pieced together from whatever broken bits of column were available to the builders: a pediment of one style or period, a capital of another, a shaft from yet a third. The provenance of the parts did not matter. It sufficed that this material from the past served the present purpose.

Architects have other ways of using the past. Consider New York City's old Pennsylvania Station: it was meant to look like a Roman bath, perhaps in order to transfer the grandeur of the ancient empire to the modern railroad company that was displaying its wealth and glory. Or consider some of the post-modern buildings now on display in our cities: Gothic arches atop glass-fronted skyscrapers after Corbusier or Mies, with additional odd bits and pieces of whatever style it amused the architect to incorporate. The elements are meant to recall the past, if only to dismiss it, even while they are intended to function in a striking new structure.

This volume shows that philosophers have as many ways of using the past as architects have. The chapters here assembled were written for a conference on the role of Hellenistic philosophy in the early modern period. Some of them discuss past philosophers who consciously used or deliberately refused to use the work of their predecessors. The authors of these chapters do not themselves use the past in their presentations. Other chapters use the thought of Hellenistic thinkers to describe and analyze the work of early modern philosophers. The chapters in the first group are historical studies of past philosophers' stances toward earlier work; the chapters in the second group use the work of Hellenistic thinkers as a source of landmarks for locating early modern work, so that we can place it more exactly on the historical scene or in relation to our own work. Only a few of the chapters explicitly ask methodological or meta-historical questions about the work being done. In this Introduction, I will raise a few such questions that seem to me to emerge naturally from the chapters themselves.

Long and Osler show us a pair of philosophers – Lipsius and Gassendi – who want their views to recall those of past schools of thought: Stoicism and Epicureanism. Of course they were not simply repairing old monuments. A noted architect remarks that "slavishly restoring old buildings to their supposed original condition . . . goes against the very grain of traditional architecture."[1] It goes against the grain of philosophy as well. As Long and Osler make clear, both these philosophers felt that their own Christian allegiances made it necessary for them to build major modifications into the old structures. Nonetheless, they plainly wanted to be read as reviving ancient systems. Osler raises the question of why Gassendi wished to show that the antique buildings could profitably be retrofitted with the latest Christian appurtenances. She points to the usefulness of Epicureanism for Gassendi's anti-Aristotelian purposes. But it seems to me that that alone does not wholly explain the depth and passion of Gassendi's commitment to his master. He could, after all, have been an anti-Aristotelian atomist without espousing Epicurean ethics. And although the question of why a philosopher would revive an ancient view applies to Lipsius as well, Long does not ask it.

We may get a clue to an answer, applicable to Lipsius as well as to Gassendi, in the fact that both of them switched religious allegiance more than once. Perhaps they wished to use antiquity to show that the sectarian differences that were wracking Europe should not be allowed to have so much importance. If pre-Christians could design an edifice that held up well enough over the centuries to accommodate the way we live now, it would seem that our present disagreements with one another were not fundamental.[2] The times in which they lived, as well as their own troubled religious experiences, made this point a matter of great importance. Whether the particular hypothesis is right or wrong, an answer of this sort would help us understand why philosophers engage in this sort of rebuilding, and this is a point that needs an explanation whenever a philosopher does so. The explanation may well not be a philosophical one. It may, however, point to the engagement of the philosopher with central social or political problems of his or her own times, and that in itself is an important, if often neglected, aspect of the history of philosophy.

Locke's use of Cicero, as Mitsis presents it, seems to call urgently for an explanation of some kind. Locke did not on the whole present his thoughts as reviving those of antiquity, but Mitsis argues that in discussing moral education, he did. Locke, he says, not only recommended Cicero's *De Officiis* as a useful teaching device; he seemed to espouse the morality it conveyed. Yet his own Christian views – however unorthodox they may have been – make this quite puzzling. If the evidence of Locke's nearly life-long devotion to Cicero is as compelling as Mitsis claims it is, then the question of why Locke relied so heavily on *De Officiis* is indeed difficult. Was Locke inconsistent in doing so, and did he finally come to see this, as Mitsis suggests? In any case, the question remains why he built Cicero so visibly into his thoughts on education to begin with. Mitsis raises the question but leaves it unanswered.

Rutherford makes it clear that Leibniz takes pains to emphasize the ways in which he preserves important elements of the thought of his predecessors. Unlike Lipsius and Gassendi, he does not take material from only one ancient style, nor indeed does he confine himself only to antiquity. He found valuable stones in cathedrals as well as porches. Rutherford helps us to understand the complexity of Leibniz's appropriation of the past, and Wilson's chapter brings out another aspect of Leibniz's use of ancient thought – his subtle acceptance of elements of Epicureanism. In doing so, she broadens our appreciation of the ways in which that view was used quite generally in the early modern period. But like Rutherford, she does not take up the question: why was Leibniz concerned not only to display fragments of the past in his systematic edifice, but also to stress their provenance? I suggest we must turn again to religious concerns. If we can now see that many different ancient thinkers had each built upon some part of the truth, the same is likely to hold now. Perhaps the warring sects of European Christendom each have something to contribute, and perhaps the Chinese could not only learn from us but help us in our own design. We must hope that together we are making not a tower of Babel but an ultimately unified and worthy monument to God's infinite wisdom as the architect of the best world.

Miller argues that Grotius was actually influenced by Stoicism (as some modern scholars interpret it) in his view of natural law and its place in moral deliberation, but that we cannot be at all sure that Spinoza was. Grotius knew and cited Stoic texts; we have not as much evidence that Spinoza knew them, and he does not cite them. Miller thus concurs with Long about the relations between Spinoza and the Stoics. Like Long, he points to affinities between Spinoza's ethics and Stoicism as well as to differences. But both of them might agree that Spinoza resembles not the architects of Penn Station but the workers who threw together patchwork pillars for the Istanbul cisterns. Spinoza did not care where the parts came from or what they reminded us of as long as they were useful for the construction of a temple in which a most untraditional deity could be contemplated in most untraditional ways by those in the know.

I think Miller is right in saying that Grotius was different. But he does not explain why that vastly learned man should have presented himself as influenced more by Stoicism than by other theories he knew just as well. More specifically: why did he choose to stress the fact that he was using Stoic materials in constructing his own natural-law edifice? What was he doing in aligning himself with the Stoics? What did he think he gained by linking himself with that tradition?

Miller sees that the answer may take us outside philosophy. And he goes on to raise an important historiographical question. Grotius and Spinoza were not facing the same problems the Stoics faced. Miller does not elaborate; perhaps he is thinking that the dominance in seventeenth-century Europe of a view of God and His relations to morality that the Stoics could not have considered is a chief feature of the situation of early modern philosophy. How, then, Miller asks, are we to understand the later use of an earlier theory when the problems to be approached with the aid of the theory have altered? I think that this is a particularly appropriate question when the subject is, as it was for this conference, the use made of earlier philosophers by later ones. The fact that the other chapters pay little or no attention to it is perhaps a result of the way we now think of philosophy itself.

Philosophy today is often done with a full and deliberate disregard of the past. Philosophers, it is supposed, take up certain problems that could be taken up at any time. The basic question about their work is whether they have gotten the right solution. Where the problem came from, or where they got their solution from, are matters of little or no interest. This view affects much current historiography, but I agree with Miller in thinking that it may not be the most helpful way to approach the subject.

We are often taught that when we work in this ahistorical way, we are following the innovative example of Descartes. Stephen Menn strikingly suggests that we should be rather cautious about taking Descartes' claims at face value: even his claim to be disregarding the past seems, remarkably, to belong to a tradition of intellectual self-portraiture. Descartes may or may not have known about his ancestry in Galen; besides, Menn says, he was indeed innovating at least in claiming to have a novel method of philosophizing. Why was originality so important to him? It is not enough to say that he wanted foundations for the new science. Gassendi wanted them too, but he got them by reusing the past. Historians of philosophy now do not push this kind of inquiry to its limits. Perhaps we leave off because we think it is a matter of course. We are Cartesian enough to assume that in attending to the original parts alone of what philosophers say, we are considering whatever is of importance in their work.

Fine's chapter raises a question about Descartes' originality that is different from Menn's. She asks whether Descartes in fact said something new about our knowledge of our subjective states, or whether he had been anticipated by earlier Hellenistic authors. Against Burnyeat and McDowell she argues that he had been. But she is not arguing at all that Descartes used the work of his predecessors – if without acknowledgment. For Long, Osler, Mitsis, and Miller, some or much of what their philosophers say is *explained* by their appropriation of past work. For Fine, nothing in Descartes is explained by his relation to the Cyrenaics or to Sextus. Fine is simply trying to locate Descartes in relation to what had gone before, and to object to the views of other interpreters of Descartes. Her enterprise is descriptive. She does not, for instance, say either that Descartes went further with errors that had already been made by the ancients, or that he took ancient insights further than their originators. She is simply using the distant past of philosophy as providing landmarks with which to get a better fix on the location of a building from our own less-distant past.

Nadler, like Fine, is trying to compare his philosopher's position with earlier views. But where Fine is making a historical claim, Nadler says he is not. He is not interested in how much Spinoza had read of kabbalah or of Philo. His aim is to show that Spinoza was not a mystic and that there is no mystical epistemology, whether kabbalistic or Philonic, in his work. Spinoza's own writings show that earlier commentators who claimed him for mysticism were just mistaken. Nadler needs to refer to earlier mystical writers only because the commentators he is criticizing saw them as sources for Spinoza. But his main point seems to be that if mysticism puts us off, we needn't worry: Spinoza is untouched by it, and so is available for purely rational discussion. Nadler uses earlier writers simply as landmarks, to show more precisely where Spinoza is not.

Ainslie aims to locate Hume's own skepticism by relating it to earlier versions of skepticism. But he argues in addition that Hume himself used past skepticisms for the very same purpose. If Hume were not adopting any of the ancient versions of the doctrine, he was at least using them to describe his own position. Hence Ainslie's study is historical in a way that Nadler says his is not. Ainslie could not have used contemporary skeptics to make his point, even if his aim is in part to relate Hume's skepticism to versions of it currently under discussion. Given Ainslie's partial historical concern, it would have been helpful had he investigated just what Hume wanted to achieve with a new kind of skepticism, one that worked differently from those available to him in past writers.

Like Locke, Butler takes Cicero as a source for an understanding of Stoicism. Long holds that Butler appropriated various Stoic insights. But Irwin does not make this claim about Butler. Like Fine, Irwin is using Hellenistic thinkers simply as landmarks with which to locate Butler's thought. The Stoics might have influenced Butler, he holds, but for his purposes the point is not important. He does not say that anything in Butler is explained by his acceptance of a part of Stoicism. Hence he is free to use the later Waterland as another marker for fixing Butler's position.

Irwin locates himself in the conventional Cartesian tradition by the amount of attention he pays to discussing whether Butler got matters right. Although he gives us a meticulous account of certain Stoic views and the arguments they involve, his real interest seems to lie in defending a version of eudaimonism that he takes Butler to have appreciated only inadequately. Irwin thus treats historical and systematic study as working with one another. For him, the ancient and early modern authors are presenting live options among which we need to decide. The interest lies in arguments that can be put in historically transparently terms. He shows us a way of working in the history of philosophy that makes it clear that the enterprise need not be purely antiquarian.

This way of handling the history of philosophy is common nowadays. It can yield valuable insights about the structure of past philosophical views. But it seems to me to lose any grip on the pastness of the past. It ignores the question Miller raises: what are we to make of the fact that later thinkers were facing problems their predecessors could not have envisaged? It ignores the question of what the philosopher being examined was doing in his culture and his time in proposing his views as worthy of attention. And it does not lead us to investigate why philosophers take the particular stand toward their past that they do. All these questions need to be answered if we are to broaden our appreciation of the varied ways – brought out so well by the chapters in this volume – in which past philosophers have related themselves to their own pasts, which are also ours.

Notes

1. Richard Rogers (1997), 79.
2. I owe this suggestion to John Cooper, who makes it in a forthcoming essay on Lipsius.