

Prolegomena to the Historiography of Philosophy

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In recent decades, the question of the relevance of the history of philosophy for philosophy, and the question of the right way to go about writing the history of philosophy, have become objects of an increasingly lively discussion. The background for this could perhaps be sought in the fact that the attempts to liberate philosophy from history initiated at the beginning of the preceding century seem to have met with difficulties surprisingly hard to overcome. A marked tendency in early 20th century philosophy was to leave the concern with earlier philosophy to historians and instead try to establish a presuppositionless knowledge with the help of new-found philosophical tools: logico-linguistic analysis and/or phenomenological research into essences. Nevertheless, the history of philosophy has in several ways continued to make itself felt: proponents of these new directions have still found it important to relate their projects to the history of philosophy, whether it be in order to interpret and re-write it on the basis of their own presuppositions, or in order to question in a more thoroughgoing way the historical conditions of their own age and their own philosophical perspectives. In this way, philosophy, compared with other areas of knowledge, has come to display an unusual and also distinctive concern with its own history, something which may be discomforting given the original goals of founding a historically untainted discipline. Whereas in the natural sciences and aesthetics it seems possible to make a clear and relatively unproblematic distinction between the present-day practice of the field, on the one hand, and, on the other, research into its history, the study of earlier philosophy has, in contrast, remained an integral part of present philosophical discussion and concerns. Finally, this state of affairs has become the occasion for debate and more systematic reflections concerning the conditions and prob-

lems specific to philosophical historiography. My purpose in this essay is to review and examine what I consider to be the most important aspects of this discussion, in order to be able to determine more precisely what may be specific to the relation between philosophy and its history.

I. The history of philosophy in history

An initial, trite observation with which we can begin is that views of the history of philosophy are not historical constants: rather, different epochs and philosophical directions possess a most telling characteristic in the way they relate to their predecessors. There is no need here to delve into the details of this history of the historiography of philosophy, which in turn has now become the object of considerable efforts of learned historians, as well as critical and suspicious analyses. However, a brief historical recapitulation may be helpful, since the issues prevalent today might best be understood as the climax of a gradually emerging concern with the relation to the philosophical past within the philosophy of the modern epoch.¹

To simplify somewhat for our present purposes, one could say that it is not until the modern epoch that philosophy actually acquires a *history*, in the sense that earlier philosophy—or at least certain names in earlier philosophy—no longer have an unquestioned presence and binding force. Without exaggerating the traditionalism and reverence for authority of the Middle Ages, philosophical thinking during this epoch could nevertheless be seen as dominated by a conscious striving to preserve and harmonize what was considered to be already firmly established knowledge, either through revelation or pagan wisdom: the attempt to make a fresh start and seek the truth without relying upon traditional presuppositions, which marks the breakthrough of modern philosophy, represents in itself something new, be it successful or not.

¹ A brief, schematic overview of the history of philosophical historiography is given by Passmore (1967), whereas Guérout (1969) in a brief exposition makes many valuable observations. Rée (1978 and 1985) and Kuklick (1984) have analyzed the philosophical historiography of the modern epoch as a gradually emerging construction, the formation of which has been determined in a decisive way by the needs of philosophical self-legitimation and contingent changes in evaluations. In my conclusion, I will offer a suggestion as to why this may not be the whole truth. I thank Staffan Carlshamre for his remarks on an earlier version of this paper.

In thus establishing distance from the tradition, or perceiving a break in relation to it, the modern epoch faces the problem of how to consider and evaluate the philosophical past and its claims to validity.

Here it is possible to discern two main lines of thought. The first, and dominant view is that the philosophical field consists of a fixed set of competing schools or movements: a limited number of possibilities are given to the philosopher to choose among, now as well as in the past, as answers to certain fundamental, questions as timeless as the possibilities offered. This view, which can be traced back to late antiquity and Diogenes Laertius, becomes associated in the very first historians of philosophy with a critical evaluation of philosophy as a deviation from divinely inspired original wisdom. Within philosophy itself it constitutes the backdrop for both a positive and a negative stance to the tradition: on the one hand, it inspires the alleged rebirth of different ancient “schools” during the Renaissance, as well as the later eclecticism of the Enlightenment; on the other hand, it motivates attempts to break new philosophical ground in order to overcome the skepticism that looms in this plurality of competing viewpoints, basically by founding metaphysics upon a critical return to the human subject of knowledge (Descartes, Hume, Kant). The second perspective, which may be seen as a reaction emerging out of this basically ahistorical and “particularist” view of history, consists in a more “evolutionary” understanding of the history of thought, where the different doctrines and schools of philosophy, as well as the phases in the history of human culture in general, are all given a relative justification as necessary components in the gradual development towards a more complete grasp of the truth (Condorcet, Comte, Hegel).

Against this background, something radically new is represented by the idea of the historical sciences which emerge during the 19th century as distinctive disciplines with the goal of providing objective and non-evaluative knowledge of the past. This neutral, “disinterested” approach to history, which eventually also comes to be applied to the history of philosophy, is clearly different from the perspectives characterized above, even as it brings together elements from each of them. Firstly, there is a striving to discern the unique, individualizing characteristics of persons and events in history, based upon a skepticism towards more overarching and a priori philosophical constructions of history (as in Hegel, for example). Secondly, this nevertheless does not signal a return to the ahistorical view of philosophy as divided into

timeless “schools”: instead, one insists upon the necessity of considering philosophical systems within their historical context. Finally, and most importantly, one abstracts from the question of the truth or falsity of the teachings investigated, thereby for the first time consciously adopting what we might call a strictly historical attitude, which differs from all earlier history of philosophy in virtue of its methodologically reflected claim to neutrality and objectivity.²

This new historical consciousness—and conscience—brings to the fore a conflict which is sometimes considered to be inherent in the very concept of a *history of philosophy*, given that *philosophy* is seen as a discipline claiming to provide an absolute, timelessly valid truth, and *history* as a science about that which is past, which, in the case of thought, signifies that which is obsolete. As the Hegelian attempt to overcome this opposition increasingly comes to be felt as problematic, and as historical research continues to enlarge our knowledge of the history of philosophy, the question of the purpose and use of all this historical knowledge becomes ever more acute: if the philosophical doctrines in history are no longer seen as representing a unitary and authoritative tradition (as in the Middle Ages), nor as merely different aspects of an absolute knowledge (as for Hegelianism), what interest do they have apart from the purely antiquarian? The historical attitude also tends to develop into a relativist historicization, which instead of suspending the question of truth, presupposes that all philosophy, no less than other aspects of culture, is tied to its historical background or author in such a way that the question of its truth outside of this context is not even meaningful—which in practice means that all earlier philosophy is, for us, irrelevant or invalid, if not simply false. The objectification of philosophy within the historical sciences thus runs the risk of being completed via its mummification.

As a reaction against this historical supersaturation and its relativist tendencies (not unlike the situation at the beginning of the modern epoch), the beginning of the 20th century witnesses the emergence of different attempts at a radical liberation from the philosophical tradi-

² As the first typical proponents for this objectivist historiography in the area of philosophy I would name Dilthey and Renouvier (cf. Smart, *Philosophy and its History*. La Salle, Ill, 1962, ch. 3). However, a tendency in the same direction can be found earlier, in the historiography of philosophy inspired by Kant, and the somewhat diluted Hegelianism which dominated the steady flow of histories of philosophy in the German language during the 19th century (cf. Rée et al, *Philosophy and its Past* (Hassocks, 1978).

tion. On one level, these attempts to break away from the past can, themselves, be said to belong to a modern “tradition” (or perhaps a nearly traditional anti-traditionalism): proclaiming the death of all (earlier) metaphysics and founding a new philosophy upon new and better foundations is, of course, something of a leitmotif of modern thought. However, an important new aspect is that in this case, the reaction is not primarily directed against any specific philosophical tradition considered to be obsolete, but rather against the historical thinking which threatens to engulf philosophy as such—i.e. against *historicism* rather than history. One might read Nietzsche’s ruthless diagnosis of his times in the essay *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1873) as a premonition of these philosophical liberation movements. The radically ahistorical attitude which is here recommended as a cure for the disabling hysteria of collection and recollection characteristic of contemporary education and culture may be said to find its surprising philosophical realization in the projects of phenomenology as well as in linguistic analysis, insofar as one here, with a certain scientific gaiety, practices an active forgetting of history—no matter how alien such a connection might be for the proponents of these movements.

II. Philosophical history of philosophy

With this, we have reached the two extremes in current attitudes towards the history of philosophy, which can be seen as complementary opposites insofar as they agree in their rejection of or at least disregard for the possibility of an essential connection between past and present philosophy. On the one hand, we have the purely historical discipline, which continues the “objectivist” project of historical science by pursuing a kind of basic historical research, suspending questions concerning the present-day relevance and validity of the truth claims of the philosophy studied. On the other hand, we have those schools or directions within philosophy which continue the effort to build upon virgin soil, and consider the study of the history of philosophy as a waste of time or mere hindrance. Both of these attitudes raise interesting problems, but since they leave aside our guiding question—i.e. that of the specific relevance which history seems to have for philosophy—I will address them later, when I return to the idea of a “pure” history of phi-

losophy and the much-debated question of the “interest” or even possibility of such a philosophically innocent historiography. Instead, the difficulties of realizing the second, un- or rather a-historical project provide a suitable starting point for our discussion. The suspicion is that the stubborn return of the past into philosophical discussion is an indication that in some way or other, philosophy after all needs its history—or at least has prematurely broken off the analysis of its relation to it. We will therefore concentrate on the different motivations which have been offered for continuing to take a *philosophical* interest in the history of philosophy.

In order to further delimit our question, we may also put to one side the less weighty, ceremonial references to historical “predecessors” which are often made in philosophical literature in order to situate one’s own position in a space of marked out by historico-philosophical coordinates. We shall also put aside the use of the history of philosophy as a pedagogical tool for introducing basic philosophical perspectives and problems. My question here concerns rather the possible grounds for the kind of turn to the history of philosophy which aims at being both philosophically and historically serious, i.e. that aims to do justice to the gravitas of both past and present philosophy. I think one may discern two main motivations for such an occupation with the history of philosophy, both regularly associated with a certain conception of the nature of philosophy. As compared to the “objectivist” historiography of philosophy, they may both be characterized as “interested” or as relating to the present, insofar as they share the idea that we cannot, or at least should not, let the past reside within itself, its own context, but need to see it in relation to the questions, perspectives and knowledge of our own time. They differ, however, in that one may be said to understand the past beginning from the present, whereas the other wants to interpret the present philosophical situation from the perspective of the past. I will characterize each of these further.³

³ My typology here may seem coarse in comparison to others offered in the literature. However, it should be noted once again that, here at the beginning, I’m leaving aside the purportedly “neutral” research into the history of philosophy, including different “externalist” models. The heuristic function of this kind of ideal-type construction is of course always paid for with a certain rigidity of description. My divisions are partly inspired by the models found in J. Gracia, *Philosophy and its History* (New York, 1992), Chs. 3 and 5, J. Passmore’s encyclopedia article “Philosophy, Historiography of,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. P. Edwards, Vol VI: 226-30 (New York & London, 1967), M. Mandelbaum, “The History of Ideas, Intellectual History, and the History of Philosophy,” in *History and Theory*, Beiheft 5, 1965), H.-M. Sass, “Philoso-

The first alternative, which is often called “problem history” (or *Problemgeschichte*), may be called an *actualizing* form of historiography. Its starting point is a more or less reflected belief in the existence of certain objective philosophical problems, in regard to which we have now reached clarity concerning what they are and how they should be formulated. These problems, even if they cannot be eternal in any substantial sense, do at least have a certain timelessness, which in some cases allows us to read earlier philosophers as if they were our contemporaries; but even in cases where the problems have had to wait until our time to become clearly worked out and liberated from extra-philosophical concerns, they may be discerned in history as vanishing points of sorts, in the direction in which philosophers have tended. By making “rational reconstructions” of these tentative efforts, and charitably disregarding their lack of articulation and historically conditioned mistakes, we are therefore capable of bridging the philosophical distance here as well, and thus of establishing a trans-historical present for philosophical dialogue. However, this in itself does not mean that the philosopher of today will necessarily have to devote much interest to the history of his discipline: only insofar as we are actually able to find anticipations which can be reconstructed as interesting contributions to our own discussion do we have reason to look back.⁴

In contrast to this view, the other direction may be described as a *historicizing* attitude. This approach may take several forms, but a common denominator is a striving after an awareness of the historical preconditions of the contemporary philosophical situation, originating

phische Positionen in der Philosophiegeschichtsschreibung. Ein Forschungsbericht” (*Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 46:3 (1972) 539-67) and R. Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres,” in Rorty *et al.*, eds., *Philosophy in History. Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1984). It may be enlightening already at this stage to make a rough comparison of this division with Rorty’s model. That which I call “actualizing” historiography in the following is thus closely related to what Rorty calls “rational reconstruction”: my “historicizing” attitude is related to his *Geistesgeschichte*, and the “neutral” or objectivist writing of history already mentioned answers to his “historical reconstruction” and doxography. What I call “externalist” readings, finally, move within the area of “intellectual history” or “history of ideas.”

⁴ Many of the proponents of such an “actualism” or problem history can be found within analytical philosophy: examples would be Wedberg’s (Western philosophy, Plato), Russell (Western philosophy, Leibniz), B. Williams (Descartes), Strawson (Kant), Bennett (Kant, Spinoza), Stenius and Barnes (the Presocratics). However, the problem-oriented history of philosophy within Neo-Kantianism could also be included here (with Windelband at the fore), as well as Husserl’s “critical history of ideas” and Jasper’s conversations with “the great philosophers.”

from a certain skepticism concerning the alleged timelessness of philosophical “problems.” At one end of the spectrum, we may place historical relativism in a pure form, which does not leave any room for a new philosophy that would so to speak move at the same level as those which are historically given: philosophy today must instead be transformed into a critical meta-philosophy or a supra-philosophical “historical consciousness,” and in this way be absorbed into a kind of history of philosophy.⁵ More cautious is the position which holds that we cannot without further ado take “our” philosophical problems as given, but must trace them back to their historical origins in order to truly understand them. Philosophical problems and doctrines are, on this view, *neither* timeless *nor* hermetically locked within their own historical horizon: they may undergo significant change and development which transforms not only the answers but also the manner of questioning itself, but nevertheless leaves a certain commonality of interest and theme. At least when we are concerned with Western philosophy, this historical process includes us as well, and in trying to understand earlier philosophy it is therefore necessary to take into account both the historical specificity of the philosophy and the fact that we ourselves are already a part of its “effectual history” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*, to use Gadamer’s word)—we are rooted in tradition even before we start conducting the history of philosophy as a particular discipline. However, this does not rule out our finally also engaging in a more immediate dialogue with our predecessors; rather, it is only through such a complex hermeneutical process which we may establish a common horizon within which both the past and our own time come into their own.⁶

⁵ As examples of relativist historians of philosophy and culture in this sense one might mention Spengler and Collingwood. Perhaps no clear division should be established between this more explicitly relativist approach and the “neutral” history of philosophy, which because of its lack of a standpoint might be said to carry a relativist seed within itself; to this extent, Dilthey and Renouvier may also be added to this strain of thought.

⁶ As the classical proponents of such a non-relativist historicism (in the sense here indicated) one can point to Heidegger and Gadamer; perhaps Croce as well may also be said to belong to this line of thought. In more recent literature, Taylor and Gracia (op. cit.) have seen the real relevance of the history of philosophy for philosophy in the uncovering of deep historical preconditions which may otherwise be difficult to discover; for similar motivations, see Ch. Taylor, “Philosophy and its History” (in Rorty *et al.*, *Philosophy in History. Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1984).

For the first of the above, actualizing standpoints, it is thus *contingent* whether the history of philosophy is of any relevance for present philosophy, something which follows from the assumption that we now know what the genuine philosophical problems are. In any event, history on this view is not important for philosophy *as* history, if this means something at the same time familiar and strange, the encounter with which may transform our own manner of raising philosophical problems—the past is basically of interest in virtue of its similarity to the present, either as a constructive contribution or as a classical, paradigmatic example of a common philosophical error. It is of course desirable that a positively oriented reconstruction of earlier philosophy should be possible, especially when it concerns what we intuitively (an intuition more or less guided by tradition, of course) perceive to be “great philosophers”: the claim to have found and understood the fundamental problems of philosophy will otherwise seem less credible. But there is nothing to prevent the necessity of written off much what has traditionally been included in the canonical history of philosophy as philosophically irrelevant or at least obsolete. This actualizing form of the history of philosophy thus resembles the ahistorical conception in earlier philosophical historiography; it is also the form which has been most closely associated with the attempts to establish a historically innocent philosophy, to the extent that history here has continued to play any visible role.

For the second, historicizing attitude in its various forms, philosophy is on the contrary *essentially* historical: if we are to reach genuine insight into what the philosophical problems really are, historical reflection is necessary. A philosophy which disregards its own historicity and reduces the history of philosophy to a timeless philosophical dialogue is likely to degenerate into an fruitless pursuit of badly understood problems. The supposedly immediate contact across the ages which problem history seeks to establish all too easily falsifies history by simplifying the picture of the past, and thereby blocks the self-understanding which a more radically historical perspective might yield. In other words, we lock ourselves up within our own horizon by reading the present into the past and refusing to consider seriously anything going beyond or against this perspective. The historicizing interpretation of the history of philosophy thus shows greater similarity with the “neutral” historiography, in that it insists that the past must be allowed to be speak on its own terms, which sometimes may mean

something radically different from our own perspective (at least to start with, and perhaps also in the final analysis). However, it also differs from this historical objectivism through its roots in a Hegelian, teleological view of the history of philosophy, which can be seen in the goal of reconstructing larger historical connections.⁷

To discuss the justifiability of these two approaches to the history of philosophy at a general level is difficult, since they are based upon different conceptions of what philosophy is or should be: they have different views of the possibility of objective philosophical knowledge, valid beyond the historical situation, or at least they differ with respect to the difficulties involved in any attempt to establish such knowledge. A debate concerning the *principles* of the history of philosophy in which the participants take their own views on this matter for granted therefore seems destined from the very start to end up in aporias, and must instead be transferred to a metaphilosophical level: to that extent, the view one has of philosophy determines in advance the relation to the view of how the history of philosophy should be written. At the same time, it is obvious that a certain historical orientation is an integral part of both of these positions, and that their ability to make the history of philosophy intelligible from their own perspective is an important aspect of how one would judge their general plausibility. Because of this, *concrete* examples of philosophical historiography might even constitute a possible arena for the confrontation of philosophical perspectives which otherwise tend to ignore or quickly dismiss each other: it is possible to begin communicating about a common, to some extent objectively given historical “object,” not in order to put one’s own view of the nature of philosophy aside and do “pure” history, but precisely in order to muster all the resources of one’s own perspective in the effort to develop a philosophically fruitful interpretation. But with this, we have moved from the meta-philosophical level to the ground level of concrete exercises in the history of philosophy: to what

⁷ The problem-oriented history of philosophy often contains as well a more or less marked and recognized teleological element, insofar as one here reconstructs earlier philosophy with guidance from present-day discussion. The model for this form of teleology, however, is not so much Hegel as it is the Aristotle who in the first book of the *Metaphysics* reconstructs the history of the gradual discovery of the different causal factors by earlier philosophers. To try to put the elusive difference into a formula, one might say that the actualist sees history as a development leading *up to* the truth, whereas the historicist may see the historical happening itself *as* the very unfolding *of* truth.

extent the one or the other position may be fruitful for our understanding of the history of philosophy is a question which seems almost impossible to settle in principle—it can only be decided through actual interpretations.⁸

III. The problem of understanding: objectivity and relevance

So far I have deliberately omitted one factor complicating the picture of the different approaches to the history of philosophy, namely the question of the possibility and interest of objective historical understanding, i.e. to what extent the classical principles of the program of historical objectivism, to understand the past *sine ira et studio* and “wie es eigentlich gewesen,” can and ought to be applied in studying the history of philosophy. Even if the approaches characterized above, as philosophically “interested” and present-oriented, deliberately transcend the limits of purely historical understanding, they are compatible and may be associated with either objectivism or relativism as concerns the *possibility* of such understanding—which means that it may not always be possible to draw the limits between the different positions as sharply as I have tried to do here.

Within so called problem history or actualizing history, the predominant view would seem to be that it may very well be possible to reach an understanding of earlier philosophy which is in some sense independent of our own philosophical horizon, but that we need not let ourselves be restricted by this: if we find an interpretation which to us

⁸ Such a *gigantomachia* concerning the history of philosophy may of course be said to exist already, even if it is not often consciously understood as such. Perhaps it is this lack of reflection which sometimes results in the discussion of different interpretations becoming locked in a stalemate concerning the principles of the history of philosophy, or alternatively leads to a narrow-minded focus upon details which ends up neglecting the larger issues. A reasonable basis of criticism, it seems, would instead be partly an estimation of the interpretation from the perspective of the “neutral” historian, and partly a comparison with interpretations which take competing viewpoints as their point of departure with regard to what is of philosophical interest. One problem with such a confrontation by way of history, however, is that one of the few things actualists and historicists tend to agree upon, is that the claim of the “neutral” historian of philosophy to judge the historical value of their interpretations is at best doubtful—which means that the possibility of beginning from a common, objectively given historical ground seems to dissolve, while the basic difference concerning what is of interest in philosophy, and therefore in the history of philosophy, remains.

is philosophically more interesting, even though historically more problematic or doubtful, it is legitimate to divide and transform the historical object to suit our own interests. Others on the contrary may think that such an objective understanding is in any case an impossibility, since we are never able to free ourselves completely from our own perspective, and may therefore defend their approach by saying that we should make a virtue of necessity, and consciously and expressly understand the past in our own terms, instead of striving for an unattainable goal, with a result which becomes less interesting the closer we come to reaching it.

Of the two main forms of the “historicizing” approach, *explicit relativism*, can itself be divided into two forms. In one case, the historian’s own perspective is exempted from the general relativist perspective, by making so to speak a distinction of type between history and its reflection in historical consciousness: with this, one may then make a claim to both objectivity and superiority in one’s understanding in relation to the past, precisely because of the allegedly unique insight into the historically conditioned character of all (other) standpoints and the timeless pattern of basic anthropological or other facts which can be discerned behind them (Renouvier, Dilthey). In the other possible form of explicit relativism, the historian does not in this way try to escape relativism for his own part, but accepts the historicity of his own time as something inevitable: therefore, he also gives up the claim to an objective historiography, and instead takes his place in the historical happening in order to let himself be guided by the truths of the present (Collingwood, Spengler). The more cautious form of historicization, on the other hand, which is not clearly or explicitly relativist, is not quite so easy to fit into the scheme, since it in itself amounts to a questioning of what is involved in understanding ourselves as well as history; due to the “effectual-historical” connections, which precede the thematizing approach to the past of historical research, our understanding of the past can never be *either* a presuppositionless partaking of the self-understanding of the past *or* an application of categories completely alien to the historical object.

The combination of different aspects thus produces a broad field of different approaches. It is also worth noticing that the practice of philosophical historiography sometimes brings together what declarations of principle might seem to separate (and the other way around). One example of such an overlap is that the kind of relativist history of phi-

losophy which includes the historian himself in its relativism (Collingwood) curiously enough may result in a variety of historiography which in its form is hard to distinguish from that which presupposes the existence of timeless problems and the possibility of objective understanding (e.g. Leo Strauss): i.e. full-fledged relativism may in practice be indiscernible from what one might call an objective “realism” within philosophical historiography. Such examples further illustrate the difficulty of discussing the historiography of philosophy at a level of principles, without reference to actual historical interpretations: it is not always obvious how programmatic declarations are supposed to be realized in concrete examples.⁹

Instead of continuing to juggle these categories, and before discussing any single standpoint in more detail, I will now take up, first (in this and the following section), the general question concerning the interest and, above all, the possibility of a purely historical approach, and, secondly (in the rest of the paper), the difficulties associated with the attempt to move beyond this and establish a philosophical-historical dialogue. The common denominator for all of the approaches sketched above, including relativism, is that they try, in their different ways, to relate the history of philosophy to its present; in this respect, they are all opposed to the kind of history of philosophy which wants to understand the past completely in its own terms. This conflict or tension between “objective” and “interested” philosophical historiography could thus be taken as the second main opposition in the current discussion.¹⁰

⁹ See the essays by Collingwood, Strauss and Gunnell, collected in King, ed., *The Idea of History* (1983). Collingwood is here criticized by Strauss (1952) for judging the historians of antiquity in terms of a modern ideal of history in his overview of the history of historiography, thereby deserting the principle behind his own “logic of question and answer,” that thinkers should be assessed from out of their own questions. But Strauss himself is subjected to a similar criticism by Gunnell (1978): Strauss forfeits his claims to objective historical understanding by construing the historical tradition he needs in order to question modern political philosophy.

¹⁰ The main characteristics of the standpoint of the neutral historian of philosophy have already been sketched above (the “historical school” of the 19th century and its different descendants). In virtue of its concern with the historical context, this line of historiography is related to but not identical with various “externalist” perspectives, which intend to explain philosophy from the outside, either as a function of political, social and economical circumstances (as in the sociology of knowledge and the Marxist tradition of historical materialism), or as an expression of the general conceptions and cultural context of its epoch (as in the history of ideas or “intellectual history”). In this paper, I will not go into the specific problems and dangers associated with such a sociological or cultural “monism” (Mandelbaum, 1965), but limit myself to a historical

The main argument of the objectivist historian for his approach is of course that it is the only one that holds out any hope of reaching historical truth; the often frivolous treatment of history within the philosophically interested style of historiography tends to result in hopelessly anachronistic interpretations, which ultimately may even work against the philosophical interest which motivated this kind of historical study in the first place. On the one hand, the “timeless problems” which actualists want to isolate from the historical context are often abstractions divorced from reality, which, if they are to be taken seriously at all, should, at a minimum, not be imposed on a past which knew nothing of them; and the question is whether these attempts to actualize history, instead of contributing to the solution of genuine philosophical problems, may not instead rather be the origin or a reinforcement of specious problems. The historicizing approach, on the other hand, betrays in various ways its commendable intention of listening to and learning from history, particularly by letting ill-grounded speculations concerning the nature of philosophy and the overall lines of its history distort and level historical specificity and manifoldness; in doing so, the opportunity of gaining a deeper understanding of one’s own historical situation is also missed, which was the original purpose of this turn to history. In either case, what emerges is neither historical

“pluralism” which grants philosophy a fairly high degree of independence. For an interesting exchange on this issue, focusing upon Descartes, see Derrida’s criticism (1963) of Foucault’s reading of Descartes.

Among modern historians of philosophy with a more or less conscious concern with historical objectivity, insofar as they do not explicitly or obviously depend upon any present-day philosophical tendencies, one might mention Bréhier and Copleston (both writing their way through the history of Western philosophy as a whole) and Guthrie (in his six volume work on Greek philosophy). However, this large-scale type of philosophical historiography, which has its own specific problems concerning objectivity (the division into periods, supra-individual connections etc.), will here not be the primary model for the neutral history of philosophy; rather, one should have in mind extensive and close readings focusing upon the works of a single philosopher, in the extreme case resulting in pure exegesis and paraphrase (as for instance in the editions of Aristotle’s work by Ross, which contain translations or paraphrases as well as commentary, or Paton’s study on *Kant’s Metaphysics of Experience*).

Among the more programmatic proponents for historical objectivism, one might mention (apart from Quentin Skinner) Dunn (1968), Ayers (1978), Kristeller (1985) and Frede (1988); Passmore (1965) and Mandelbaum (1965) may also be counted among these, as spokesmen for a “cautious” problem history. Interesting to note is also Lovejoy’s extensive defense (1939) of the possibility of objective historical understanding, despite the usual criticism against his own particular brand of “history of ideas” for an un-historical atomization of thinking.

truth nor a philosophically fruitful dialogue with the past, but rather a more or less sophisticated and skillful philosophico-historical ventriloquism: the past seems to speak, but is actually only given lip service by a philosopher-turned-historian out to rehearse and confirm his own ideas.

Quentin Skinner has established himself as one of the staunchest proponents of the necessity of understanding past thinking in its historical context, without thereby surrendering to some form of externalism. In the essay “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” (1969) he extensively demonstrates the dangers of focusing upon “what the text itself says” to the extent of ignoring the historically given linguistic context—a textual focus which is often advocated by the now-relating styles of historiography. According to Skinner, this textualism, as well as the contextualism (my terms) which aims to *fully* explain the meaning of texts in terms of their social and historical context, neglect the importance of the writer’s own intentions in understanding the meaning of the text, which results in various kinds of “mythologies” rather than genuine history of philosophy. The textualists thus tend to draw the writer into their own philosophical questions by ascribing to him intentions which he cannot very well have had, given the context of linguistic conventions within which he understood himself and his “utterance”; on the other hand, the socially and historically contextualizing reading confuses a background which certainly may be helpful in understanding linguistic acts with the very content and purpose of these acts themselves.

For their part, the advocates of a philosophically interested approach to the history of philosophy launch two main forms of criticism against any neutral historiography with regard to philosophy. The first, less interesting criticism is that such an objective interpretation of the history of philosophy, although it may in some sense be possible, is of only very limited value to us. Thus, one questions the very point of preserving past thinking without raising the question of its truth or relevance for our present-day questions. Such a purely historical anti-quarianism may seem harmless enough, and is of course widely practiced within historical science in general, where references to the “relevance for the present” are often little more than a ceremonial flourish; however, with regard to philosophy, such an approach may even have its own risks, as it easily turns into a breeding ground for historical relativism (witness again the reaction of the early Nietzsche

to the historical over-consumption of his time). Nevertheless, although it should not be allowed to dominate the field, neutral history of philosophy can be given a certain justification, as presenting a kind of raw material in the form of doxographical overviews and broader philosophical perspectives, which a philosophically more penetrating eye may put to good use in its confrontation with the past—thus, the supposed tension is really only a question of a division of labor.¹¹

The second and more fundamental objection which the philosophically interested approach levels against neutral historiography is that this simply does not constitute a possible project. At one level, this might still be seen as merely a deepening of the first criticism, insofar as one questions whether an interpretation which actually manages to be philosophically innocent will really give us anything worth calling an “understanding” of the object studied. To the extent that the attempt to free oneself from one’s own philosophical presuppositions is successful, this only has the effect of making the understanding reached a very superficial one—the achievement of the pure historian will be limited to recapitulating and paraphrasing teachings the true significance of which remains hidden. If the historian nevertheless somehow seems to avoid such a parrot-like repetition, this will be because he tacitly lets himself be guided by views and elements taken from the philosophy of his own time—but in an unclear, arbitrary and superficial way, which is therefore likely to be less fruitful than when the openly “interested” historian consciously and methodically applies his own philosophical tools and perspectives. If the partisan of this latter approach may be accused of practicing the art of ventriloquism, the counter-metaphor exposing the pure historian could be that of a mime-artist, who admirably goes through the motions of philosophical thinking, but denies himself and his object the advantage of a living voice.¹²

¹¹ Such a balancing of neutral and interested approaches against each other is made by, e.g., Lamprecht (1939), Passmore (1965), Powers (1986), Curley (1986) and Morgan (1987). Whether this is also Rorty’s position is not completely clear to me (see the following footnote).

¹² The foremost critic of the possibility of objective understanding, working in the wake of Hegel and Heidegger, is probably Gadamer, whose criticism is somewhat ambiguous, however: at least in part, it rather seems to be of the first-mentioned kind, that is to say questioning the independent interest of objective understanding (see further footnote 15 below). Others who have argued for the necessity of a “philosophically conscious” history of philosophy include Randall (1939), Makin (1988) and Gracia (1992), ch. 1 and 2. Rorty (1984) appears to waver(between two positions: on the one hand, he sees historical and rational reconstruction as complementary but

As concerns the first criticism, it is unusual, at least within the history of philosophy, to see anyone defend neutral research into history as having independent interests, in the way which is more or less taken for granted within for instance the history of science or of ideas in general—philosophical doxography is seldom seen or valued as a goal in itself. Even those who think that the history of philosophy should as far as possible be investigated without presuppositions usually accept that the final motivation for undertaking such a task is still the possibility of finding material of philosophical interest.¹³ One counter-objection which the objective historian may nevertheless make is that the criticism he faces seems in one way or another to presuppose the superiority of the present above the past: and whereas this may seem reasonable within the natural sciences (barring certain extravagant ideas within the theory and history of science), in the case of philosophy it may be thought of as an arrogant and dangerous provincialism. We cannot exclude the possibility that history contains hidden treasures in the form of now forgotten perspectives and alternative solutions, which we may still find useful in pretty much the same form in which they were originally formulated: and a condition for gaining access to these potentially fruitful alternatives and allowing them to deepen our understanding of philosophy could be that we study philosophy without present-day presuppositions.¹⁴ Of course, the project

distinct aspects of the project of writing the history of philosophy, which therefore ought to be conducted apart; on the other hand he argues for a standpoint motivated by general meaning holism, namely that we do not really understand very much of history until we relate and translate it into our own conceptual universe and philosophical concerns, which means that the two aspects of the history of philosophy will be deeply intertwined from the start (for more on these views, which seem to be somewhat uneasy sitting together, see p. 49 f. and 68, resp. 52 f.). Perhaps a certain amount of rational reconstruction, which cannot be undertaken here, might show Rorty's position to be consistent.

¹³ Even Quentin Skinner, who as far as possible wants to suspend the question of the relevance to us of the historically investigated philosophical doctrine, finally justifies the work of the historian of ideas with the possibility of gaining philosophical knowledge or at least self-insight (1969, section V). In the essay from 1984, he himself also exemplifies, from a similar motivation, the combination of neutral historiography and positive evaluation. Clean-cut proponents of pure doxography, as opposed to its practitioners, are hard to mobilize (but cf. Oakeshott 1955), and I will not further discuss the possibility of defending such a perspective (or non-perspective).

¹⁴ For this very common defense, see, e.g., Skinner (1969 and 1984), Kristeller (1985) and Curley (1986). This defense may be said to harbor its own dangers, however, by introducing a gray area in which philosophical work is done so to speak obliquely, by way of history, which may be tempting as a safer and more comfortable choice than

of the neutral historian as such only amounts to a determination of the objective content of a philosophical doctrine: but nothing excludes immediately attaching a positive evaluation to this.

In light of the first criticism and the response to it, it may be said that the purely historical and the now-relating approaches may very well be united in one and the same study, and that they are perhaps best seen as two different but complementary aspects of one and the same project in the history of philosophy—the differing results are seldom caused by an exclusive adherence to either of them, but rather by the fact that one or the other of the element predominates, while the other is subordinated as the means to the first's end. To use Rorty's terms: the rational reconstruction must after all be anchored in historical understanding, if it is not to turn into a free-floating construction; and the historical reconstruction cannot very well be performed in complete philosophical innocence if it is to recreate something we are able to recognize as philosophy. The mutual criticism can therefore to some extent be reduced to pointing out the dangers of one-sidedness, rather than any defects of principle in either of these approaches. The danger of the "now-relating" interpretation is thus that it will reduce the history of philosophy to nothing more than a distorted or tentative version of the present, a self-image wrongfully projected onto the past, where we see only what we may recognize from our own case; whereas history as reconstructed within a programmatic objectivist interpretation may rise up like the tower of Babel, unintelligible and therefore destined to become indifferent to us.

The possibility of such a harmonizing balancing between the supposed contraries is certainly worth mentioning, considering the polemical exaggerations often found in the discussion. Nevertheless, such a mediation would gloss over the real differences which form the foundation of the second objection to a neutral history of philosophy, concerning the very *possibility* of objective historical understanding. With this, we are in the vicinity of fundamental problems in the philosophy of language concerning understanding and meaning, transla-

approaching philosophical questions head on and in one's own name. Thus, the historian turned philosopher-by-proxy may allow himself to hint indefinitely at the philosophical interest and potential of the material he is interpreting; but when pressed as to the real philosophical value of this material, he may retreat to the position of a pure historian, as a task which is at some level legitimate in itself; and when pressed as to the historical value or accuracy of his interpretation, he may complete the circle by appealing to the philosophical interest of what may be historically doubtful.

tion and interpretation, which have recently been the subject of very lively discussion. But although these issues, even in their most general forms, no doubt can be related to the problem of the history of philosophy as well, it seems to me less relevant here to apply *general* arguments for how the interpretation of language and texts happens or should happen (I present some reasons for this view in the following section). Of more interest will be to see which difficulties, if any, are *specific* for understanding and for entering into a dialogue with the history of philosophy, insofar as this is supposed to differ not only from historical understanding in general, but also from the problem of communication between different philosophical movements in the present. The questions we must try to answer are therefore, first: to what extent may we reach an *objective understanding* of earlier philosophy? Secondly: what are our possibilities of establishing a *dialogue* with the philosophical past. This very distinction between understanding and dialogue or application has of course been called into question, but I will argue that it is a distinction that ought to be maintained, since an objective or neutral understanding, at a certain level, is in my view possible, in history no less than otherwise, and must be seen as a precondition for engaging in dialogue with the history of philosophy, and not an obstacle.

IV. The possibility of objective understanding

One problem with several of the objections which have been raised against the possibility of objective understanding in the history of philosophy, I believe, is that they refer to what in fact are more general difficulties connected with understanding and interpretation: to the extent that the conclusions drawn from these difficulties are valid, they must therefore be generally applicable. This means, however, that we either will get results that are intuitively implausible (there is no possibility of objective understanding at all) or that the content of the criticism instead must be weakened in a way which makes it less exciting than it might have appeared (objective historical understanding is possible, but this is not “real” understanding). I would insist, rather, as already indicated, that there is, in a, certain, almost trivial sense, something which may reasonably be called an objective or neutral understanding, and that an interpretation which strives for this cannot be

dismissed *a priori* as philosophically uninteresting; the difficulties which such an enterprise no doubt encounters do not amount to an impossibility of principle, and the *a priori* denial of its own interest would seem to imply a questionable “assumption of incompleteness.”¹⁵

An obvious analogy which may clarify this and serve as a kind of counterexample is the case where a person makes a drastic transition between two present-day philosophical perspectives, without thereby understanding the new one in terms of the old, or in any other way relating them to each other—the understanding which lies at the bottom of the transition exists, so to speak, completely in terms of the new perspective. Such a sharp conversion may of course not be the typical case, and might even seem psychologically bizarre or intellectually perverse; but it is hard to see why it would not be *possible*, as a matter of principle. After all, the person in question must have acquired his first philosophical perspective without understanding this in terms of another one, so there cannot be any impossibility of principle for a similar appropriation now—it is only a matter of forgetting and learning something new. If the other, already accepted participants in the discussion also accept the newcomer, it seems we cannot dismiss the

¹⁵ Gadamer’s criticism of objectivist historical research in *Wahrheit und Methode* is difficult to get clear on: it appears to waver between denying the possibility of objective understanding and questioning its interest. Thus, Gadamer at certain points claims that any historical research in philosophy demands an interest-determined selection and guidance from one’s own understanding of the philosophical problems, which means that it cannot be objective in any absolute sense (e.g. p. 250 ff., 261 ff., and cf. p. 533). But in other places he criticizes historical objectivism for its very intention of suspending questions of truth and relevance, since such a purified *Mitverstehen* (regardless of whether it is possible to attain) could not have any independent interest—it is not comprehensible as a form of existential *Verstehen* or *Erfahrung*, which always demands an “application” of that which is to be understood (p. 290 ff., 329 ff.). These two aspects of the criticism also become tied to each other: the artificial and unreasonable character (according to Gadamer) of the attempt to determine someone’s view without asking about their interest, shows up in the evaluations which nevertheless always creep into such an undertaking (p. 342 f., 374 f.). One should also read, from this perspective, Gadamer’s statement that his criticism is not immediately concerned with changing the *practice* of the historian of philosophy, but primarily tries to change his *self-understanding* (p. 250); thus, according to Gadamer, we should *of course* not give up the striving for objectivity which is laid down in the customary methods of historical learning (p. 515), just as justified and productive “prejudices” must be distinguished from distorting ones (p. 282 f.). All in all, these statements taken together make for a well-balanced view – perhaps a less exciting one to the extent that it is true.

person's grasp of the new perspective as superficial: a parrot does not raise insightful questions or further develop thoughts.¹⁶

That one may in this way make a radical "leap" between different philosophical perspectives, as well as between different life-worlds or language games in general, can not reasonably be denied. It is another thing that the ability to be integrated into any human context whatsoever ultimately may be grounded upon certain brute facts of nature or, if you will, a basic existential constitution, and that we therefore cannot imagine an understanding or explanation which does not presuppose *anything*. The point is that the necessity of such a pre-given understanding (or ability to learn) is probably more a matter of being human than of relating different, more richly articulated life-worlds to each other—the possibility of constructing a regress argument against the contrary supposition at least seems obvious (how would a child ever learn anything about anything?). Of course, for one who is already philosophically trained in a particular school or manner of thinking, it will be *natural* to begin from tentative "translations" of the new ideas into already familiar categories; but this must be seen as an in principle dispensable shortcut to objective understanding, rather than as an obstacle or a definite limitation to gaining such understanding. The ability of a human being to philosophize and understand philosophy may rest upon certain metaphysical predispositions (Kant) or upon a pre-ontological "understanding of being" (Heidegger), but not, in all likelihood, upon his already being possessed of a philosophical system. We must therefore take it that no one is actually arguing that objective understanding in *this* sense is an impossibility, notwithstanding appearances to the contrary.

Now, there are of course well-known philosophical arguments concerning the indeterminacy of translation and interpretation, or, in another quarter, the impossibility of rigorously and finally delimiting the context of interpretation, which might mean that objective interpreta-

¹⁶ From a Rortian-Gadamerian perspective, it may perhaps be objected that if I appropriate something in this way, it is actually no longer a matter of *me* understanding something: rather, I *become* someone else, by simply letting go of certain of my previous beliefs. But the possibility of this is all that my argument requires: given that it is in this way possible to transform oneself and enter into a new perspective, it must similarly be possible for the historian to gain such an understanding of his object "from the inside," by a kind of "compartmentalization" of his mind, without subscribing to the doctrine in question or weighing it against what he may know about or consider true in present-day philosophy (of which he in theory may know nothing and in practice, perhaps, often very little).

tion and understanding *is* in fact not possible in general, and this would then be applicable also to the relation between philosophical theories and even the translation of a philosophical theory from one language to another, regardless of whether we stay within a single epoch or move between different ages. But whether or not some argument of this kind is tenable seems to me of less interest for our question here, precisely because of the general character of the arguments: if they are valid, they are applicable quite generally, and pose no special problem for the historiography of philosophy, in the sense that the current discussion would seem to presuppose. Moreover, it would seem that the “objectivity” which is questioned or undermined through such general arguments is also of a rather strong sort: it is doubtful whether this is really what is at stake in the discussion of the possibility of objective understanding in the history of philosophy, or indeed in many other contexts. What we should focus upon here, I believe, is that we at all events often make an intuitive distinction, which it seems pointless to obliterate through a mere terminological change, between a purely understanding attitude and a more strongly interpretative and truth-interested attitude—and it is the significance of this distinction which we must try to clarify.¹⁷

Now, it is at a minimum not immediately obvious why we should not be able to imagine the understanding of the past on the same model as in the transition between two present-day perspectives. There are of course several differences between the transition between two present-day perspectives what is normally at issue in the historiography of philosophy, but the question is whether any of these differences are essential. To begin with, and perhaps somewhat surprising, the *distance in time* cannot reasonably be a decisive factor: indeed, the example given above might serve to undermine the standard conception of a concern with *the past* as constitutive of the historical attitude. At least with regard to the aspects mentioned above, there is no difference of principle between attempting to understand a contemporary and a phi-

¹⁷ Furthermore, we should avoid confusing the conceptual and the factual level. Sometimes, the claim to objectivity may certainly be used as a mere catchphrase to defend what is in fact only deeply entrenched and therefore hidden philosophical and historical perspectives, by dismissing new and therefore more salient ways of looking at history as subjective, ungrounded and speculative interpretations. Without underestimating the frequency and force of this maneuver, it seems to me wiser to save the concept of objectivity and its open applicability, rather than abandoning it because of its possible abuse.

philosopher of the distant past: in both cases, it is a matter of entering into a certain way of thinking with the help of its direct expression, its self-understanding and various background information which may enlighten us concerning what is taken for granted by the philosopher himself—and in none of this is it certain that contemporary philosophy will be more easily accessible than past philosophy. The historical attitude in this sense may be directed towards a contemporary theory as well as one in distant times: and the leap into another universe of conceptions would therefore seem to be possible, thus far, in history no less than within one and the same age.¹⁸ Usually, to be sure, the time-factor naturally leads to another difference, one concerning the *availability of evidence* for the content of the doctrine in question: when it is a matter of the more distant past, we may lack relevant texts, we may be incompletely informed about the historical and cultural background, and we may have no living proponent to ask in order to clarify points we find it difficult to understand (to paraphrase Plato: texts always say the same thing). However (without taking death to be either trivial or accidental), the indicated problems are after all basically a matter of differences of degree and accidental circumstances, and therefore not categorically distinctive of our relation to the past. Even if the historian cannot in a strict sense be accepted as a participant in the conversation in for instance a dead language, he may often receive indirect confirmation of the depth of his understanding by partaking of historically handed down dialogues and commentaries—which is often as far as we get in relation to our contemporaries. In this way one may also refute the arguments which have been leveled against Quentin Skinner, to the effect that the attempt to establish the historical linguistic context would be either a hopelessly uncertain undertaking, lead to an infinite regress or reduce the author to a mere function of his times—none of these problems distinguishes, as a matter of principle, the understanding of linguistic acts in the past from the understanding of those of the

¹⁸ Lest it be seen as perverse to use the characteristic “historical” in this way, one might point out that the time-factor was in fact not essential to the original use of the word in ancient Greece. Thus, the subject of Herodotus’ *Historia* (from Greek *historein*, to investigate, examine, look around) is not specifically any past happenings, but on the contrary focuses upon the geography and contemporary culture of the regions described; and this in fact continued to be a general use of the word “history” up until recent times, as in the expression “natural history” for a descriptive account of the domain of nature (cf. also the traditional term for one of Aristotle’s biological works, the descriptively oriented *Historia animalium*).

present. The problem of ascertaining the “universe of discourse” to which the text belongs, as well as the danger of ignoring it, are likely to be the same in both cases, and the difficulties in the one case are not necessarily larger than in the other.¹⁹

In the original example we considered a person who accepts the philosophical teaching he has studied as being basically correct. However, what is decisive for the historical attitude as I here understand it, and what lies at the basis of such a conversion, is rather that one does *not*, to begin with, try to decide the truth of the doctrine studied, or relate it to any standpoint of one’s own, but that one in the first place tries to understand the claims it makes about reality in its own terms. Now, it is widely recognized that in this process we have to let ourselves be guided by a “principle of charity,” and thus make certain “assumptions of completeness” about the text or theory we study: an interpretation which forces us to ascribe what is, according to our own standards,

¹⁹ The indicated examples of criticisms of Skinner have mainly been taken from Tarlton (1973) and King “The theory of context ...” (1983). As one can see, the recurring argument here can be read in two different ways: either as leading to a general and therefore even more radical problem concerning the objectivity of understanding, which may thus be thought to establish the more specific thesis that objective understanding in the history of philosophy is equally impossible; on the other hand, and this is the way I am reading it, such a general lack of objectivity will probably be an unwelcome result for many of those who question the objective history of philosophy, or if not, it will at least show that this is not, as often seems to be taken for granted, a problem specific to our understanding of the past. At all events, the general thesis may indicate that arguments concerning the problem of reaching objective understanding in the history of philosophy can never be taken as an excuse for simply disregarding the context of utterance and the author’s self-understanding, any more than the general problem gives us any such license in the general case. As a limiting case, and to bring the matter to a head, one might take the problem of understanding one’s own former self, or indeed the conditions and precise content of one’s present thoughts: if there is indeed a general problem concerning the objectivity of understanding, it will be relevant in this case as well—if understanding is always “understanding differently,” this will be true of the thinker in relation to himself, at every instant, no less than of the attempt of others to understand him. (This is not as paradoxical as it might seem: consider, e.g., the case of Husserl or Heidegger, trying to grasp the content and true significance of their own work, spanning several decades of intense elaboration.) But if this is so, it is hard to see why such a general holism should have any particular repercussion on our practices in writing the history of philosophy. If trying to grasp some or as many as possible of the aspects of the self-understanding of a present-day interlocutor is a reasonable task, why should we treat the texts belonging to the history of philosophy any differently—even though there may not, in either case, be any unitary, monolithic phenomenon which is simply *the* self-understanding of the philosopher? The danger here, I think, is that the vague notion of a past unattainable in the *an sich* of its self-understanding, will be used as an excuse for not showing the past the respect we pay—or think we ought to pay—the present.

wildly false, incoherent or unreasonable beliefs to the author is itself implausible, barring other relevant evidence. This observation is sometimes construed as if we would have to assume that the theory we are trying to understand is actually *true*. However, if taken literally, this seems obviously false. Therefore (and here I am of course myself applying a principle of charity), this is best understood as a polemically motivated exaggeration. What we must presuppose, I think, is only that the theory is basically rational and reasonable in a certain minimal sense: that it strives for and attains a certain level of consistency and coherence, and that it does not blatantly exceed or contradict the evidence we know or have reason to believe was accessible to its author.²⁰ In some cases we will no doubt encounter texts and perspectives which seem to make a point of flaunting these criteria and standards (say in Heraclitus or certain texts of Buddhist thinking where ambiguity and paradox often appear to be intentional): but we may safely assume that this can be accommodated and “rationalized” as a way of achieving a certain effect by leaving the literal form of expression behind. There is also a problem concerning the more precise determination of these criteria (for instance, whether the proponents of the theory understood them in the same way we do), and concerning how they are to be balanced against each other when they come into conflict. However, this is once again something which is not unique to the understanding of past philosophy, but is relevant for the historical, purely understanding or descriptive attitude in general. If anyone wants to argue that in studying the history of past philosophy, we have to presuppose the truth of the theory studied in any stronger sense than this, or that the difficulties of applying the assumptions of completeness make objective understanding impossible, he must also accept that the same goes for our understanding of contemporary philosophy—presumably an unacceptable result, or at least one apt to dissolve our specific interest in the problem of philosophical historiography.

²⁰ Cf. Carlshamre (1994) on the possibility of working with different versions, ego- or alter-centric, of the different kinds of assumptions of completeness made in connection with the interpretation of texts. Here, I’m proposing basically the altercentric “principle of humanity” presented by Grady as alternative to an egocentrically understood “principle of charity” (“Reference, Meaning, and Belief,” *Journal of Philosophy* 1974).

V. The transition from understanding to dialogue

An objective or neutral historical understanding of philosophical theories thus seems to be possible in principle, or at least not associated with decisively larger difficulties when it is a question of understanding a past theory as compared with a contemporary one—as far as we have hitherto been able to see. However, it is clear that we often do not content ourselves with such an understanding “from the inside” – not in general, and in particular not in the history of philosophy. This fact may be the reason that “understanding” in the debate concerning the history of philosophy is sometimes even taken to *mean* something else, something more, namely understanding by relating to one’s own philosophical perspective—what might otherwise be called *interpretation*. Such a re-definition of understanding to mean interpretation or “understanding-differently” seems to lie at the basis of both Gadamer’s and Rorty’s arguments here. Since a neutral appropriation or radical conversion to another perspective, according to these authors, does not represent a “genuine” understanding (Gadamer) or only gives a “minimal form of understanding” (Rorty), it follows that understanding (of the real, full-fledged kind) presupposes relating to one’s own philosophical horizon and conceptual world. In this way, it is obviously impossible to speak of an objectivity of understanding (or interpretation) except in relation to the conceptual universe concerned—and, if we accept certain radical arguments for the relativity of translation and interpretation (Quine: “indeterminacy starts at home”), not even in relation to that. What I have argued above – that there is a clear sense in which historical understanding without such relating to the present is possible, despite holistic theories of meaning – is therefore not really disputed by either Gadamer or Rorty: they seem rather simply to presuppose that the understanding which results in a strict repetition of the teaching must be a non-genuine or superficial understanding. It is hard to see what the reason for this might be, except a tacit assumption to the effect that the original or “proper” content of the philosophy studied is either no longer valid in its original form, or is tied in an inextricable way to its historical context. To see this, one might make a comparison with the case of understanding a text within the natural sciences or mathematics: although here too there will of course be difficulties or questions of interpretation, as indeed in any text, it seems implausible that we would always have to understand a mathematical

text from, for example, the 18th century differently in order to really understand it at all, if we also accept it as true.²¹

But what, then, is the reason for the fact that we who are concerned with the history of philosophy usually want to transcend the neutral understanding—so often that it can apparently be taken for granted in the discussion that we *have* to do this in order to “really” understand? The primary reason why we find it necessary to translate into our own conceptual world, if we are to be able to appropriate the insights presumably contained in the theory, is probably that we cannot accept certain basic assumptions in the theory we are trying to understand; we are not prepared to abandon our own perspective without further ado, regardless of whether it is a matter of what we think is empirical knowledge or ways of conceptualizing and understanding philosophical questions. The possibility of reestablishing and embracing a philosophical theory of the past in its full historical form, or even of understanding it completely on its own terms, is therefore likely to remain an idealization; but the necessity of translating into the questions of the present is then not the result of a general meaning-holism, but of the fact that we cannot simply *accept* the philosophical teaching we are studying, despite the fact that we think we may *understand* it almost as well or at least as well as its actual historical proponents. When the charitable attempt to understand fails, we must explicitly take up a position outside of the teaching studied, and try to relate it to “our own perspective”—which we have of course already begun by not accepting it as valid in all respects.

²¹ For the de-valuation of the interest of pure *Mitverstehen*, not the denial of its possibility, see Gadamer (1960; 1975), e.g. p. 357 and 374 f., and Rorty (1984), p. 49–53 (esp. p. 50). In Rorty, who is of course deliberately provocative—although apparently not ironic—there is no doubt as to our superiority: the objective historical understanding is likened to the exchange of polite phrases in a language one doesn’t understand, and the purpose of the rational reconstruction is the self-justification of present-day philosophy by conversation with “the mighty mistaken” (p. 51 f). Gadamer’s perspective, as already indicated, is more complex, and my interpretation of it might seem to contradict what he says concerning the necessity of presupposing the possibility of the truth of past philosophy. It is possible that Gadamer is really merely questioning the idea of neutral understanding as a worth-wile project in itself: but to the extent that “*Verschmelzung* of horizons” is supposed to mean, as is apparently the case, a dialogue where the interpreter relates to his own philosophical conceptions, rather than relating only to an understanding from a more primitive level of independent experience, without such conceptions, it seems that we as well may speak here of a tacit “assumption” that the doctrine under study is obsolete. Apparently, then, for both Rorty and Gadamer the falsity or irrelevance of earlier philosophy in its original form is simply too obvious even to mention.

This does not mean, however, that in order to find a philosophy defective we need to have our own, elaborated philosophical theories or standards upon which to base our criticism: the disagreement may be relatively limited, and our “own point of view” need neither extend beyond an immanent critique of certain aspects of the theory, which may be of a more formal character, nor question the theory from out of its own explicit purpose and standards.²² What we are primarily interested in here, however, is a deeper disagreement, where even certain basic assumptions of the theory studied seem to us unacceptable, but the theory as a whole is nevertheless somehow felt to be of interest. It is at this stage that the arguments which the “interested” historiography directs against “neutral” history of philosophy find their real justification, I believe: we are no longer satisfied with an interpreter who is merely able to repeat the teaching we already believe we have understood (no matter how valuable an Aristotle or Kant reincarnated in the guise of the learned historian of philosophy may be at *a certain stage* of our studies)—what we need is a translator and mediator, i.e. someone who is proficient in the language and theories of both parties. The beginning of deeper hermeneutic questions and tasks, beyond those of the historical and hermeneutic craft, concerned with restoring the context and self-understanding of the past—which in themselves may be immense, of course—is thus that the approach that is purely understanding turns into dialogue.²³

VI. The dialogue with philosophy in history: difficulties and possibilities

It should be clear, however, that these sorts of translational and interpretative problems are not distinctive for our relations to earlier as

²² The “immanent” criticism of a philosophical doctrine constitutes a kind of gray area between objectivity and interest. What this shows is that even if the basic attempt to gain understanding, before any now-relating interpretation, already tends to require that one make use of certain standards of evaluation, this need not mean that one in any interesting sense goes beyond the doctrine studied: it can be limited to the application of certain minimal criteria of rationality.

²³ The perspective here is of course overly abstract, because it theoretically isolates two aspects of understanding and interpretation which in practice will usually be closely intertwined from the start: nevertheless, it seems worthwhile to preserve and be clear about the distinctions at the conceptual level, precisely in order to be able to see how they interact at the factual level.

opposed to contemporary philosophy: a critical dialogue may obviously be as necessary in the one case as in the other, and as already indicated above; creating a fruitful dialogue between contemporary philosophical schools may be no less difficult than understanding thinkers of a past epoch in relation to any present-day philosophical school. The neglect of this circumstance has meant, it would seem, that quite general problems of philosophical communication have often been discussed as if they were unique for our relation to the history of philosophy, or that problems of understanding past philosophy have been discussed as if they were no different from those of historical understanding in general. The attempt to determine what is characteristic of a *dialogue within the history of philosophy* may therefore conveniently be divided into two steps. First, we may ask what is characteristic for *philosophical dialogue in general*, regardless of whether it takes place between two positions which are contemporaneous or distant in time; secondly, we may finally try to determine what if anything is the distinguishing trait of philosophical dialogue *in history*.

To begin with the first question, something which appears to have been surprisingly neglected in the discussion of the historiography of philosophy is the special character of philosophical texts, which makes the problem of translating and understanding them particularly difficult, as compared with texts and theories in most other areas, regardless from which epoch they derive. What I am referring to is the unsurprising fact that philosophy, insofar as it attempts to question and determine the most basic categories and fundamental concepts of the world and our understanding of it, in its central ideas will move at a high level of abstraction. To the extent that two philosophical theories which are to be put in relation to each other really are different, and have different ways of understanding and conceptualizing the field of philosophy—its “object,” methods, and ambitions—this will bring forth all the problems of translation and comparison which have primarily been discussed with reference to scientific theory, and in particular natural science. However, in order to see that the problems of communication caused by this circumstance are not specific to a dialogue with the *history* of philosophy, one need only think of the gap which has separated so called analytical and continental philosophy during the better part of the 20th century (although it may be questioned whether the main, if not only, ground for this division has been

different philosophical paradigms, as opposed to language barriers and other cultural or political circumstances).

What then is the basis for the particular difficulties often thought to belong to the *historical* philosophical dialogue? One factor, I suggest, is what one might call the *reflective* character of philosophy. Perhaps one might tender the tentative claim about philosophy in general that it is not so much an investigation of reality *directly*, but mainly, whether this is fully understood or not, a matter of reflecting upon our *relation* to this reality, in its various theoretical and practical forms. Philosophy can therefore not, as the preceding paragraph may have seemed to do, without further ado be understood on analogy with high-level theory within natural science—it is instead a question of a meta-science, or perhaps rather meta-understanding.²⁴ But if philosophy in this way is an essentially reflective or second-order activity, it is obvious how vulnerable it must be to the more fundamental changes that knowledge and evaluations undergo in history, even as it intentionally strives to transcend the specific presuppositions of its own time. By touching upon the very core of the system of concepts and beliefs characteristic of its time and culture, philosophy may certainly be less exposed to changes at the surface level of empirical evidence; but when this core itself undergoes changes—due to more radical changes in science or due to political, economical, sociological and other circumstances—the philosophical superstructure can hardly avoid changing as well. This then is a point where history at least *might* make a difference, insofar as contemporaneous philosophers may instead be expected to accept the validity of the same scientific results and live within a culture which is fairly homogenous in other respects as well.²⁵

²⁴ To give some hint of the kind of evidence which might be offered for such an idea, one might trace Quine's "semantic ascent" and Husserl's "transcendental reflection" back to the first reflection upon the correlation between language, thought and reality in Parmenides. Saying that philosophy is a reflection upon our relation to reality rather than upon reality itself should not be interpreted as a denial that some philosophers might say—perhaps correctly—that what is discerned at this level, whether it be ideal forms, a priori categories, logical structures, intentional acts or existential structures, is more "real" than anything we usually take to be so.

²⁵ This is of course not always the case, especially when we go beyond Western or Westernizing philosophy: the dialogue between schools of thought which are contemporaneous but have originated in widely different cultures is associated with problems analogous to those which arise in the historical dialogue. The important difference is the lack of any (substantial) *relation of tradition* in the former case—about which, see below. A relevant example would be the encounter with philosophy from the Far East

The reflexivity and theory-laden character of philosophy means that problems of translation, comparison and understanding surface here which remain hidden or relatively uncomplicated at lower, more empirical levels, or even within “direct,” non-philosophical science. The real problems of translating and interpreting Aristotle, to take one example, do not emerge when we try to determine the correctness of detailed observations in his biological works, or even when we compare his general understanding of living organism with current biological science, but when we try to understand his philosophical interpretation of these sciences. When it comes to discussing, for instance, how reasonable the doctrines of substance and of causes are, we cannot appeal to any immediately falsifying or confirming evidence, since it is here a question of basic philosophical categories, within which we (it appears) no longer understand reality: the difficulties, indeed, begin even at the basic level of translation in the literal sense, which easily leads to genuine interpretative questions. The problem, then, is that we cannot directly translate these notions into any obviously corresponding ones in our own conceptual or indeed linguistic universe, and thereby interpret them “in our own terms”; it may seem that we are forced to choose between standing completely outside or inside the “life-world” or “worldview” of which they form the basis. What possibilities of philosophical mediation, then, are available in this situation? With this question, we return to what was earlier characterized as the two main forms of now-relating interpretation within the history of philosophy, and to their different ways of establishing a connection with the unfamiliar and distant past. We can now more clearly see how these approaches under such circumstances are able to raise a claim to be able provide, in a way that “neutral” philosophical historiography cannot, objective knowledge—if not about the historical facts pure and simple, then at least of their philosophical content, to the best of our own knowledge.

The actualizing or problem-historical approach often sees the solution to the problems of communication in being deliberately historically selective, i.e. separating out and appropriating certain parts of a teaching which as a whole seems too strange or questionable to be a viable philosophical alternative, on any reasonable interpretation. It is thus thought, for instance, that mediaeval philosophy of language and

in Western philosophy from the 18th century on, which seems to have been preceded by only very indirect and highly mediated connections.

logic may be separated out and understood in isolation from other elements in the “system” of mediaeval thinking, with its ties to Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics as well as Christian theology. As already mentioned, this approach is usually grounded upon the assumption that there are certain objective philosophical problems transcending the historical context, problems that can be identified. That which cannot be incorporated or at least sympathetically reinterpreted in this way may then be accounted for with the help of external explanations as to what forces—psychological, sociological, ideological, political, etc., if not simply a lack of what we now consider well-established empirical knowledge—may have lead highly intelligent and perceptive minds to go astray and perhaps even engage in discourse without cognitive content. Now, it is hard to see what *objections on the basis of principle* could be raised against such a manner of proceeding. After all, the context of understanding must in practice be delimited in *some* way, and just as not everything in the contemporary background of a thinker is relevant to the understanding of his philosophy, not all parts of his world of thought need be connected in an inextricable way. But is it not possible to establish some limits to this work of rational reconstruction, insofar as it is meant to convey at least part of the *historical* truth, and not merely use material from the history of philosophy as a stimulating starting point for independent theory-building?

Quentin Skinner (1969) has suggested a general criterion for an acceptable historical interpretation, which may be rendered in the following way: no thinker can justifiably be ascribed a teaching which he would not have been able to recognize as his own—that is, the (potential) self-understanding of the agent sets a limits to the description of the significance of his linguistic acts. However, this criterion might seem to have a limited value precisely when it comes to philosophical texts: the author here usually strives for universal validity in a way which makes the limits of his (possible) self-understanding particularly difficult to determine. As Rorty has formulated the matter (1984), we are also interested in what an ideally rational and educable philosopher would be prepared to accept as “his” teaching. The philosopher *wants* (more often than not) to be understood in a universal, timeless philosophical context, the actualist could say, and it may therefore even be seen as a historical injustice to insist upon relating him to his historical background: the historian of philosophy who with putative objectivity

limits himself to reconstructing a teaching in its full historical form neglects something which is also “there”: its philosophical potential, seen from the standpoint of our knowledge and evaluations. We want to know not only what the philosopher actually manages to say, but also what he is *trying* to say, but perhaps lacks the linguistic and conceptual tools to express, and for this it is necessary that we ourselves have an understanding of the problem he is struggling with.

Perhaps we must once again be content with noting that not very much more can be said about this problem at a general level: where it is reasonable or defensible to draw the line for rational reconstruction is a question that must be decided on a case-by-case basis, as the extent to which this strategy is reasonable in any particular case is simply a question of the extent to which the aspects one wants to separate really can be understood as theoretically independent of one another. At a minimum, the criticism of such attempts at reconstruction would do better to focus upon the concrete result and its reasonableness as an interpretation, instead of raising any obstacles of principle, as long as the author is clear on the limitations of his interpretation. It seems undeniable that the strategy of “actualizing” earlier philosophy by way of rational reconstruction, listening to what the philosopher is trying to say beyond that which is historically contingent, has focused upon something which is central to the self-understanding of philosophy in general. The difficulties and dangers of anachronism which always accompany such projects may also be compensated for by their philosophical interest and provocative ability: if nothing else, a philosophically daring interpretation of past thought may stimulate valuable historical research in the very attempt to refute it.²⁶

The second, “historicizing” variety of now-relating historiography instead regards the focus on the *relation of tradition* as the chief possibility of establishing a connection backward in time. According to the historicist, when it is a matter of understanding *our own* history, we

²⁶ One variety of rational reconstruction which may seem especially questionable is when a philosopher on a historically meager basis is ascribed a doctrine which, according to the reconstructor himself, is patently misguided and false. Nevertheless, it may still be of interest to take a figure from the history of philosophy as the starting point for reconstructing and criticizing, in its original form, what one sees as a fatal philosophical mistake, even if this means disregarding the fact that the theory in question, in its original context, may have been well motivated and a remarkable achievement in itself (cf. Russell on the Aristotelian syllogistic in the *History of Western Philosophy*, and Ryle on Cartesian dualism in the *Concept of Mind*).

cannot adopt the approach that our history is a completely different culture, developed in isolation from our own: the way in which problem history bridges the historical distance, by discovering shared questions, tends to neglect the circumstance that we are from the start connected to this history as to our origin. Thus, it is no mere coincidence, nor a result of something grounded in what might be human nature, if we are able to recognize “our own” questions in history—rather, this is their point of origin from which they have then been passed on to us. But if this rootedness in a specific tradition guarantees in a certain way the possibility of understanding—as opposed to where no such relation to tradition is present—it at the same time complicates the hermeneutic process in a peculiar way.

From the historicist perspective, the problem with the actualist’s understanding of history “in our own terms” is that it will often actually be an understanding of history in its own terms, but as these terms have been transformed via the intervening historical development. The danger attending this particular form of the “circle of understanding” is a perspectival distortion: the historical process of sedimentation which transforms philosophical doctrines and concepts into rarely questioned commonplaces makes it difficult for us to fully understand the significance they had in their original context—the problem is not that they appear strange to us, but that they may not appear strange enough. If we then also presuppose that we ourselves have an adequate or at least historically superior insight into the philosophical problems being examined, and, in the historical interpretation, merely have to free these from irrelevant accretions, we run the risk of neglecting dimensions of earlier philosophy which might otherwise enrich our understanding of the problems involved, and ultimately of the idea of philosophy itself.²⁷

On the other hand, the historical circularity which is involved in the turn to one’s own tradition also leads to a questioning of the application of “objective” understanding. To begin with, this is no less than problem history exposed to the dangers of perspectival distortion. A naive belief in the possibility of objectivity tends to lead to the uncriti-

²⁷ One recurring case of collision between different conceptual worlds in present-day history of philosophy is that which manifests itself in the distinction, within analytically oriented historiography, of what is thought to be a philosopher’s serious contributions to philosophy of language, logic, epistemology and theory of science, from his more questionable metaphysical, psychological and even religious speculations. The question is whether this distinction is not often made too rashly and heedless of the significance of what is thereby in effect excluded from the field of philosophy proper.

cal adoption of a determined, historically handed-down pre-understanding of both philosophy in general and of the philosophy to be studied. The relation of tradition thus makes the seemingly simple “transition” to another perspective into a complicated process: to leave one’s own perspective behind cannot finally be a question of drastically discarding or abstracting from the philosophical convictions one might have, but will as a rule consist in a demanding and laborious testing of the handed-down pre-understanding against the historical object “itself.” Nevertheless, this is, I think, a difficulty which it belongs to the very intention of the project of objective understanding to solve, something which the appropriation of the honorary word “objectivity” by a superficial style of philosophical historiography should not be allowed to cover up.

However, the relation of tradition also raises anew the question of the very significance and possibility of objective understanding. Even at the general level, it is of course possible to question the purpose of objectivist historical research, which limits itself to ascertaining the content of a philosophical doctrine and suspends the question of truth; but when it is a matter of our own tradition, this neutrality may seem to take on a particularly odd or artificial character. It may be that we in general can free ourselves from the perspective of our own time, and enter into another historical age and its ways of thinking: but what we are then doing, in the case where a tradition exists between this epoch and our own, is in a certain sense to understand ourselves. The relation to tradition means that already from the start it will be unhistorical and potentially confusing to treat the historically given doctrine and anything in our own time as simply two alternative theories, at the same level and possible to understand independently of each other: even when the radical immersion of life into the life-world of the past succeeds, we still remain in a certain way within the horizon of our own conceptual universe. Against this background, I think one should understand the point sometimes made by Heidegger, that what I am able to discover in the past is determined by what I can see as a possible significance or sense for myself today. When we try to explicate the sense of our own projects, philosophical and otherwise, the interpretation of the past has thus already begun.

It is in this relation to tradition, I think, that we should see what is specific for philosophical understanding and dialogue in *history*. Whereas both the objectivist and the problem-oriented forms of histo-

riography are forms of understanding and dialogue which may without any essential differences be directed towards the present as well as the past, towards other cultural spheres as well as towards the historian's own, the historicizing position focuses upon what is characteristic in our relation to our *own* history. This is not to say that it is already decided which of these ways of practicing the history of philosophy is the most fruitful: whether or not we actually stand in such a deeply determining relation to the tradition as the historicist wants to claim is once again a question which can hardly be decided except through detailed and careful interpretations in the history of philosophy.

Of course, the objective historian as well has a method for better understanding a philosophy which appears strange and difficult to comprehend, which is essentially to widen the field of vision to external factors and larger historical contexts: here there will be a fluid transition from immanent understanding to externalist explanation. I will not discuss this method and its problems here, but by way of conclusion sketch a way of taking a stand on and evaluating historically given philosophies which to some extent is associated with the external perspective of the historian, and neither presupposes a relation to tradition or demands that history should answer our own questions. The point of departure for this approach would be what I earlier called the reflective character of philosophy, i.e. that it can be understood as an attempt to investigate—articulate, arrange and critically question—the fundamental categories or forms of thought which lie at the basis of our relation to the world, and that in doing so it must in some sense take its lead from contemporary knowledge and culture, while yet striving for universal validity. A possibility of comparing philosophies, within as well as between different cultures and from different epochs, would then be to assess how a philosophical perspective is able to account for its own, historically given “matter of reflection” and the problems this raises. A philosophy could then be judged to be more or less adequate given this material (in analogy to how a scientific theory may be evaluated in relation to the evidence it recognizes or has at hand), instead of being measured in relation to what are supposedly objective questions, detached from history, or declared untouchable within its historical context.²⁸ The transhistorical and shared “problem” uniting

²⁸ At the same time, from the perspective sketched here, I think one may see a certain justification for the related theses or “assumptions of completeness” of Collingwood and Gadamer, to the effect that an interpretation which makes a philosophical theory

different philosophies may then instead be said to consist in filling the reflective and critical function of philosophy in relation to its particular time. This does not exclude that there might also exist an a- or at least transhistorical framework which philosophy is able to reach, and thus also more specific problems and solutions which may be shared over history and between different cultures. But also in order to understand what contribution a philosophical theory really makes to such a comparatively timeless discussion, it will probably be more enlightening both historically and philosophically to see it in relation to the state of knowledge in its own time, rather than trying to understand it as an isolated statement.

The focus upon this relation between philosophy and its time may also reveal affinities between philosophies which otherwise might be thought to stand far from each other, by showing how a common philosophical strategy can take on different forms depending on the matter of reflection. One important consequence of this is that to repeat, apply or “remain true” to earlier philosophy would then not have to mean reinstating specific doctrines or re-appropriating isolated elements of these which are “still of interest,” but might also signify taking up a certain way of doing philosophical work or a view of what philosophy is: in fact, such links of tradition may already in practice be more important for much of our understanding of the history of philosophy and our own place in it than any tradition preserving the content of specific doctrines (regardless of *what* this understanding more specifically amounts to). Something which also speaks in favor of such an understanding of philosophy in its concrete historical context is that it allows us to explain how we may regard someone as a great philosopher and at the same time consider much of his thinking as obsolete or simply

patently false or unreasonable thereby undermines itself, and must rest upon a misunderstanding as to what problems the author of the philosophical theory was actually trying to solve. However, in accordance with what has been said above, I think that what can be required of a reasonable interpretation is only something weaker, namely that the philosophical doctrine in question should be shown to have a certain degree of *relevance* or “adequacy” given the historical situation and the material of reflection it provides, not that it actually manages to solve the problems it sets itself beginning from this situation. To assume otherwise seems to indicate either an exaggerated reverence for philosophy, or the tacit assumption that we are always dealing with the “great” philosophers—which presumably, to anticipate the final point, have come to be estimated as great precisely because of their ability to confront and handle currently fundamental problems of reflection.

false, by our own standards: the excellence and exemplary status of a philosopher lie in the way in which he has confronted and managed to deal with fundamental issues raised by the then current state of knowledge, including his own philosophical tradition. From such a perspective, it also seems to me that the better part of what is today the recognized canon of Western philosophy may be given a more substantial, historically as well as philosophically grounded justification, despite the fact that the philosophical teachings concerned are often thought to belong irretrievably to “the past”: we would not have to see this canon as merely a room of references construed for the purposes of philosophical dialogue, or as a mythology adjusted to fit the needs of self-justification of current philosophy—and on the other hand, we need not unnecessarily project consoling dreams of an unfathomable, hidden wisdom onto the thinking of the past in order to respect its achievements.