

## Why studying the history of philosophy matters

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The debate over whether and how philosophers of today may usefully engage with philosophers of the past is nearly as old as the history of philosophy itself. Does the study of the history of philosophy train or corrupts the budding philosophers' mind? *Why* study the history of philosophy? And, *how* to study the history of philosophy? I discuss some mainstream approaches to the study of the history of philosophy (with special focus on ancient philosophy), before explicating the one I adopt and commend.

"History of Philosophy: Just Say No!". Thus expresses himself Gil Harman. It is late 1980's, and, as also reported on Princeton's Philosophy webpage,<sup>i</sup> there is an ongoing heated debate in the department and the profession more widely, concerning the inclusion of the history of philosophy in philosophy departments. Does studying the history of philosophy *train* or *corrupt* budding philosophical minds? Gil Harman had come to his own conclusions, and put up the sign above for two days on his office door in the Princeton Philosophy Department. The incident took a life of its own in the analytic philosophy circles, but, as also reported on the Princeton webpage, Tom Sorell has since 'deflated' the story, in his discussion of Harman's views on the topic (Sorell and Rogers 2005: 43-44). I will return to Harman's views in what follows.

The debate over whether and how philosophers of today may usefully engage with philosophers of the past is nearly as old as the history of philosophy itself. Even the early, if not the earliest Greek philosophers had predecessors; but some did, and some did not engage with them. Much of the work of the early Greek philosophers has been lost to us, which leaves us uncertain about when philosophers started studying the history of philosophy in the West; nevertheless, it is clear that even at an early stage of the development of our discipline, philosophers did consider it valuable to study and engage with the(ir) history of philosophy. It is well known that Aristotle for instance included in his own work discussions of the views of previous philosophers, motivated not by 'antiquarian' reasons (namely, to preserve such views for posterity), but rather to argue against them, thus showing both continuity in the research questions that concerned him and his predecessors, and his own progress in relation to them. Thus, a preliminary point I want to make is that we reflect on the value of engaging with the history of philosophy as much as our predecessors did (even if without articulating it as explicitly as we do); the issue is neither new, nor specifically relatable to the concerns of modern academia.

Here I want to address two questions: *why* study the history of philosophy? And, *how* to study the history of philosophy? I will address these questions from the point of view of the 'practitioner', namely on the basis of what I have learned through my research experience in the domains of contemporary analytic philosophy and that of ancient philosophy. (My account does not aim to be a full coverage of the logical space of possible answers to the two questions I pose, nor an exhaustive review of what other academics have written on the topic.)

Let us consider why *not* to engage with the history of philosophy. A widespread argument is based on the fact that there is no such historical interest within the sciences. Roy Mash (1987: 287) reports Quine's notorious views on the history of science which extends to the history of philosophy:

'Science and the history of science appeal to very different tempers. An advance in science resolves an obscurity, a tangle, a complexity, an inelegance, that the scientist then gratefully dismisses and forgets. The historian of science tries to recapture the very tangles, confusions, and obscurities from which the scientist is so eager to free himself.' (Quine 1985: 194)

Quine was known to have an unforgiving opinion about the place of the history of philosophy in a university, and more particularly, out of Philosophy Departments. It is believed that Quine's views motivated or least contributed to the trend, in the 1960's and 1970's in the US, of universities to establish new departments of the history of ideas, to 'house' historians of philosophy in them.

The rhetoric surrounding trends is always 'bigger' than their reality. Thus, when Tom Sorrell contacted Gil Harman and asked him about the note on his door, Harman explained:

'I also think as an empirical matter that students of philosophy need not be required to study the history of philosophy and that a study of the history of philosophy tends not to be useful to students of philosophy. (Note 'tends'.) Similarly, it is not particularly helpful to students of physics, chemistry, or biology to study the history of physics, chemistry, or biology.' (in Sorrell and Rogers 2005: 44)

Comparison with the sciences is a frequent reason for genuine surprise when non-philosophers hear that one is carrying out research in a philosophy department on, say, Aristotle's metaphysics or biology. But in all fairness, they are equally surprised to hear that, e.g., contemporary biology is returning to Aristotle's metaphysics (see e.g. Austin 2019). As a matter of fact, we, philosophers, by and large do engage with the history of our disciplines and find it useful. This has to be an essential datum in our present discussion.

So how to study the history of philosophy? We cannot but approach the history of our discipline from our current standpoint, because it is the only standpoint available to us, for viewing all else. There exist different and complementary conceptions of how studying the history of philosophy relates to our philosophical concerns today. I will discuss some mainstream approaches (with special focus on ancient philosophy), before explicating my own.

*i. We and the ancients are 'fellow travellers' going towards the same destination*

One approach to the study of ancient philosophy is that according to which philosophers are engaged in addressing timeless problems, and develop incrementally understanding of those (or possibly even the ultimate answers). Thus, the value of studying ancient philosophy is that, in so doing, we walk along the same paths as our predecessors, moving forward from where they were. If conceived this way, the study of ancient philosophy turns out to be clearly beneficial to us, today's

philosophers, and can and should be considered part and parcel of doing philosophy, or at least propaedeutic to it. I call this, for short, the 'fellow travellers' approach.

Underpinning this approach there is however an assumption that is not unproblematic. What is it that secures that we operate within the same broad philosophical framework of problems as our predecessors, and that we are engaged in a common journey towards philosophical truths?

Scholars of ancient philosophy of 'analytic' training have found continuity between us and the ancients in the 'structures of informal and formal logic' (to borrow an expression that Alexander Mourelatos (1981: 66) uses to talk about Jonathan Barnes' work on the early Greek philosophers). Logic, here, serves as a universal, timeless 'code' that we can use to express the thoughts of the ancients as well as ours, in such a way that they become 'commensurable' and can be included in one and the same philosophical conversations stretched over two and half millennia.

One important consequence of this approach to the study of ancient philosophical texts, is that the encoding of ancient ideas in timeless logic enables us to examine their arguments and assess their soundness both in terms of reasoning and conclusions; and further, it facilitates identifying missing premises which can then be supplied. For instance, Barnes, who pioneered the application of this approach to the study of early Greek philosophy, explains his interest in Presocratic thought in relation to its soundness thus:

'By and large scholars [before Barnes himself] have asked what the Presocratics said and what external circumstances may have prompted their sayings; they have not asked *whether the Presocratics spoke truly, or whether their sayings rested on sound arguments* [...] My main thesis is that the Presocratics were the first masters of rational thought; and my main aim is the exposition and assessment of their various ratiocinations.' (1979, 1.ix, my emphasis)

The point made in the quotation generalizes to the study of any ancient texts, and Barnes's words describe an approach that many others and not only Barnes have taken. In my own work, I prefer to keep the investigation of reasoning and the validity of ancient arguments distinct from the examination of the truth of the respective claims. Accordingly, I do not think that we should be exploring the arguments' soundness,<sup>ii</sup> but rather divide the work into investigation of their validity *and* investigation of their truth. Of course, there is overlap between the two strands of investigation, but there is also substantial difference between them.

In terms of method, Barnes (in Mourelatos' perspicuous words), pursues the goal of assessing the soundness of past theories by these means:

'For each of the main problems that seem of concern to each of the Presocratics, he has sought to construct, in terms of premises posited and propositions derived, *a scheme that could be intelligibly coordinated with the data* of fragments and testimonia.' (1981: 66)

Creating such schemes is, for Barnes and others whose approach he represents, encoding of ancient ideas in logic frameworks. The point is that importantly, this approach to ancient philosophical texts, however implemented, presupposes a type of exercise that distinguishes the *philosopher studying the history of philosophy* from the *historian of ideas*. And there are ways of doing philosophy, of which Barnes' is one example, when studying the history and the subjects. I borrow Francis Cornford's words to illustrate the distinction I want to draw between the work of the philosopher studying the history of philosophy and that of the historian of ideas. Upon becoming Laurence Professor of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Cambridge in 1931,<sup>iii</sup> Cornford explained,

'The students of Moral Science [namely, Philosophy, in today's academia] are partly engaged in learning the history of philosophy since Descartes; but it is *their privilege to work under men who are themselves philosophers, bent on the advance of thought* [... In contrast, the student of Classics] turns *not to the future, but to the past; our study is purely historical* [...] Our whole task is to reconstruct what went on in the minds of men whose very bones were dust when Descartes was born.' (1931: 7-9, my emphasis)

While the *philosopher* studying the history of philosophy builds bridges between us and our predecessors, and is 'bent on the advance of thought', i.e. is seeking philosophical progress through the study of past thinkers, the historian of ideas does not. The divergence between these two ways of studying ancient philosophical texts has not been without friction in academia.

Those who have followed the *philosophical* approach are more than often charged of anachronism. Of course there have anachronistic 'sins' which have peppered the study of the history of philosophy, perpetrated either by attributing truths to the ancients, which they had not discovered, or by attributing to them conceptual breakthroughs, of which the ancients could not have boasted; and of course such errors should be identified and called what they are. There is always the danger of allowing today's understanding to influence one's reading of the ancient texts. But we need to remember that we cannot have a view 'from nowhere'; we cannot but approach the history of our discipline from our current standpoint, because it is the only standpoint available to us, for viewing all else. The important point is that, unless one were prepared to argue that there is no truth in anything that ancient philosophers claimed, which would be profoundly implausible, the discovery, identification and declaration of truths in ancient texts should not count as such as 'anachronism'; only the 'misuse' of the method would be culpable of that.

In addition to anachronism, there is another issue of which those following the approach we are discussing have been by and large accused of, namely of making a biased selection of ancient texts that are worth studying (or not), on the basis of how tractable such texts are in terms of being 'encodable', and thus potentially relevant to us (or not). Richard A. Watson, editor of the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, writing on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of its founding, notes:

'Analytic history of philosophy *does not have unrestricted subject matter*. Analytic historians consider only those philosophical positions, principles, and arguments that they believe can contribute to today's philosophical inquiries.' (2002: 525, my emphasis)

With respect to ancient texts, an informal ‘canon’ has somehow been created, whereby the study of Plato and Aristotle for instance is salient globally in academia, whilst for instance Plotinus and even the early Greek philosophers (with the exception of Parmenides and Zeno) are on the margin, and even considered to be non-philosophers, by some. This type of selectivity, too, is often characterised as anachronistic. However, there can be sound reasons why some ancient texts are philosophically more valuable and relevant to us than others. I will not, here, itemise the criteria for this characterisation, which are many and diverse. I will only say that there can be impaired selection, too, where ancient texts are subject to more intense study for reasons that may be extrinsic to their philosophical value per se (for instance because they are selected to be part of the undergraduate curriculum, and thus ‘incidentally’, as it were, they also become (productively!) the research focus of those teaching the curriculum). Happily, the dominance of a ‘canon’ is waning (see e.g. Zachhuber’s (2020), which brings to the fore philosophically rich texts that are beginning to receive the consideration they deserve.

ii. *Ancient philosophical texts are to be ‘mined for golden nuggets’*

A different approach, which has gained much momentum in recent years, is that according to which ancient philosophical texts are like a ‘mine’, from where to extract insights that can be developed in new theories in contemporary philosophy. In Christof Rapp’s words:

‘the idea is rather that philosophers let themselves be inspired by certain ancient puzzles or arguments—even if it turns out that the solutions envisaged by Plato or Aristotle themselves are not satisfying.’ (2019: 125)

What does “inspired” mean here? Plenty of examples from current debates in *philosophy*, as such, illustrate the idea: current philosophers extract philosophical ‘nuggets’ from their historical context and mould them into new theories, without carrying over all the principles and commitments the original thinker held.

This approach to the study of ancient philosophy has generated a number of very successful and ever-growing research programs: Neo-Aristotelian Metaphysics; Virtue Ethics; Virtue Epistemology; and novel approaches to the philosophy of mind, most prominently Functionalism, among many. The functionalist theory of mind was developed by Hilary Putnam in his milestone article ‘Minds and Machines’ (1960) that shaped contemporary philosophy, cognitive science, and computer science for the subsequent decades.

It would be unjustified to critique the ‘mining approach’ as anachronistic, because its goal is declaredly forward-looking. We cannot forbid philosophical inspiration. The concern here may rather be that there is no clear division between what a contemporary philosopher develops theoretically, and what can and should be fairly attributed to the ancient author. But should there be lack of clear distinction, this does not mean that both the contemporary and the ancient thinker contributed in some way to the formation of the contemporary theory.

My general consideration concerning the two approaches discussed so far under i. and ii. is that although there may exist misuses of these ways of studying ancient philosophical texts and errors in their applications, these cannot be a reason to dismiss them *tout court* as generally misguided.

iii. *Studying ancient philosophy is a 'remedy' against dominant orthodoxies*

Maria Rosa Antognazza has recently voiced a further point of view in relation to the study of the history of philosophy in general which applies to the study of ancient philosophy; she writes,

'[...] doing history of philosophy is a way to think outside the box of the current philosophical orthodoxies. Somewhat paradoxically, far from imprisoning its students in outdated and crystallized views, the history of philosophy *trains the mind to think differently and alternatively* about the fundamental problems of philosophy. The upshot is that the study of the history of philosophy *has an innovative and subversive potential* [...]' (2015: 161, my emphasis)

For instance, physicalism is a mainstream position nowadays; for those shy of philosophical dissent, it may be stimulating to learn that one of the greatest minds of the past, Plato, was a dualist. Then, what next?

When and how does the budding philosophical mind get trained 'to think differently and alternatively about the fundamental problems of philosophy'? Dissent is not sufficient for this. An inviolable axiom of analytic philosophy is that any proposed positions need to be justified by offering reasons and arguments for it. So only *reasoned dissent* would stimulate contemplation of alternative solutions. There are two things to say about 'reasoned dissent'. One is that, in the analytic tradition, one is trained, more than in anything else, to object to theories by generating counterexamples. This process, by itself, trains students and professionals in considering and assessing alternative solutions to current problems of philosophy.

The second remark I want to make about 'reasoned dissent' pertains to positions held in the history of philosophy, and for our purposes, ancient philosophy. The issue is that by and large one starts from the belief that the ancient position is, anyway, false. For example, arguments for mind-body dualism premised on the immortality of the soul would not sway a philosopher in training, or stimulate them to find counterexamples to it, even if it deviates from current philosophical orthodoxy. Specifically, reading in Plato that 'the souls of the dead must exist in some place from which they are reborn' (*Phaedo* 72a6-7) would not stimulate philosophical thinking outside the box. Does this mean that such arguments from the history of philosophy are useless in training students of philosophy? Happily, this does not follow, but it does signal that more work is needed to get trained to think outside the box.

I am suggesting that in order for an ancient position to stimulate philosophical creativity in a contemporary mind, it would need to contain in it at least a dimension of what the trainee would recognise as *reasoned dissent*; otherwise, it would be only of historical interest. For instance, Plato thought that the rational soul is essentially non-physical. Could this be a reason to advocate

dualism? This would be a legitimate question to ask in a philosophy exam, and a good training ground for thinking outside the box, for budding philosophers. However, what type of training would be presupposed, to be able to distinguish, in ancient texts, between false claims and reasoned dissent? Although I agree with Antognazza's claim about the value of studying the history of philosophy, I am inclined to think that recognising an ancient position as an *alternative* to a contemporary philosophical position, and thereby train one's mind 'to think outside the box of the current philosophical orthodoxies', is a philosophical challenge for, and achievement of a philosopher who is trained in both, the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy.

#### iv. *Comparative Dialoguing*

I hold that doing philosophy is essentially a dialogical activity; engaging with the study of ancient philosophy is a way of entering in a dialogue with *philosophers like us*. For me, what is timeless and enables such dialogue are not the structures of logic, and not even specific philosophical positions that we have inherited from our predecessors, on which we can make incremental progress. What is timeless is something more abstract: it is the metadatum that we are philosophers and our predecessors were philosophers, too. And what makes us all philosophers is pursuing philosophical thinking according to some essential features. The ancients were philosophers like us, who operated in a logical space defined by principles salient in their time, and engaged in solving problems salient at their time. At this abstract level we are doing the same, even though 'salience' has evolved. For example, we face bias in society and we try to eradicate it, or manage it on the social level; so did the ancients, one result of which was the invention of democracy, which philosophers are currently trying to develop. Athenian society was different from societies today, but at a more abstract level, the problems that arise and the principles we adopt have similarities, and can fruitfully be the topic of *comparative dialogues*. Similarly for cosmological problems; the ancients had not postulated quarks, but they raised a problem, which, in its abstract version, questions how the fundamental qualities constitute the elements of the cosmos; a problem that we, too, raise about the quarks' qualities. Even when new problems arise, due to new societal conditions (bioethical issues for instance) – problems that even in abstraction are different from those addressed in ancient ethics, the general point stands: comparative dialogue with the ancients helps us see how (on a meta-level) such problems are rationally addressed by philosophers.

It will be fruitful to return once again to Harman at this point, to discuss his more detailed explication of his stance on the history of philosophy:

'[...] The history of philosophy is not easy. It is very important to consider the historical context of a text and not just try to read it all by itself. One should be careful not to read one's own views (or other recent views) into a historical text. It is unwise to treat historical texts as sacred documents that contain important wisdom. In particular, it is important to avoid what Walter Kaufmann calls 'exegetical thinking': reading one's views into a sacred text so one can read them back out endowed with authority.' (in Sorrell and Rogers 2005: 43-44)

I agree with Harman and Kaufman that historians of philosophy should not succumb to what we might call 'exegesis from authority'. However, I disagree with Harman's disavowal of the wisdom of certain historical texts, e.g., ancient texts. What dissuades me from his view is that 'arguments' trumps biased practice, such as treating 'historical texts as sacred documents that contain important wisdom'. I am confident in my disagreement with Harman, because this is exactly what we do with canonical texts of our own era, e.g. in finding philosophical 'wisdom' in, e.g., the texts of Hilary Putnam or David Lewis. If one explicates what David Lewis said in a particular text, even though she would be problem-wise in the same 'era', philosophically, as Lewis is, nevertheless, it is impossible to keep apart her own understanding from the meaning of Lewis' words she is explicating. There is inescapable semantic admixture, which does not get in the way of good philosophizing. One may object to my point by claiming a difference in the degrees of admixture, when expounding on an ancient text and when on a text by Lewis, which I accept; but at the same time, this shows that there is a slippery slope with no cut-off point that has the history of philosophy on the one side and the philosophy of 'current philosophers' on the other.

Harman claims that 'It is very important to consider the historical context of a text and not just try to read it all by itself'. Why is this important and why should it be a constraint for us? I assume the response would be: in order to avoid the danger of anachronism in one's exegesis. I ask then: 'the danger of anachronism' on pain of what? Good philosophy? I say 'take the plunge' and risk it; it is worth trying, to achieve the philosophical result, avoiding the exegetical danger.

The ability to do philosophy by conversing with the past is something we have for a reason. Interpretative paradigms were generated, which inspired, motivated, and delivered results. A fundamental such paradigm, which shaped the development of the study of ancient philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and beyond, was the work of Gregory Vlastos. A contemporary of Quine, at the height of the influence of Quine in the philosophical profession, Vlastos produced his jewel, 'The Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides*', in 1954. In a sense, Vlastos took on Quine's challenge, not by moving to a Department of History of Ideas, but by showing that novel philosophical results can be derived from the investigation of ancient texts. The famous Regress of Forms that Plato derives in his *Parmenides* is shown by Vlastos to have deeper roots than the specific features of Plato's Forms as characterised in his texts, in broader metaphysical assumptions. In other words, the problem was shown not to be specific to the Theory of Forms, but to an understanding of metaphysical fundamentality which a contradiction displayed, as revealed by Vlastos. This was not just news, to the profession; it was a breakthrough and a paradigm shift in the profession, the benefits of which we are still reaping today. Vlastos engaged in what I call a comparative dialogue with Plato's metaphysics, and derived results which are of value to any metaphysician.

Generally, I believe that the ancient thinkers have not yet said all they have to say to us; so in my own research, I explore ways in which philosophical texts from the classical, late antiquity, and medieval period may be brought to bear on our current philosophical inquiries; I also explore ways in which current analytical tools may enable us to develop further the philosophical theories we inherited from the past. I do not think that the latter is necessary for justifying the analytic approach to ancient philosophy. Sometimes, comparative dialogue, which inevitably abstracts from the particulars of a theory, may result in 'deeper' understanding of the ancient theories, even if not in novel implementations of the results in contemporary philosophy. But in all cases investigating



ancient philosophical problems at a higher level of abstraction from which they are framed in the ancient texts delivers understanding, and may occasionally even also offer new applications of the abstract ideas to philosophical problems today.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> 'The Eighties: a snapshot', on the Princeton Philosophy Department' webpage:  
<https://philosophy.princeton.edu/about/eighties-snapshot>.

<sup>ii</sup> Namely, to explore the truth of the arguments' premises, and the validity of the arguments' reasoning, together, at once.

<sup>iii</sup> I note here that while being professor of ancient *philosophy*, Cornford was based in the Classics department and identified himself with that Faculty, rather than with the Faculty of Philosophy.

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