

HUMILITY AND HISTORY

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I argue that amongst its many benefits, the history of philosophy is an excellent resource for the cultivation of certain intellectual virtues, most notably gratitude, humility, and justice. Acquaintance with the history of philosophy can, therefore, be edifying, in the sense of being conducive to the cultivation and exercise of virtues. These virtues can be cultivated in many ways, but the history of philosophy offers unique means for securing them, and some familiar pedagogical and intellectual uses of the history of philosophy in fact reflect its edifying functions.

Philosophy is an ancient subject, but what is the value of an understanding of its history for its practice? What can contemporary philosophers draw from an historical understanding of their subject? I argue that amongst its many benefits, the history of philosophy is an excellent resource for the cultivation of certain intellectual virtues, most notably gratitude, humility, and justice. Acquaintance with the history of philosophy can, therefore, be *edifying*, in the sense of being conducive to the cultivation and exercise of virtues. These virtues can be cultivated in many ways, but the history of philosophy offers unique means for securing those virtues just mentioned – or so I will argue. In what follows, I hope to show that some familiar pedagogical and intellectual uses of the history of philosophy in fact reflect its edifying functions.

The origins of philosophy are unclear, but certainly there were, in Greece, India, and China, vigorous philosophical traditions by the sixth to fifth centuries BCE. Indeed, it is possible that Confucius, the Buddha, Thales and the

authors of the *Upanisads* may have been contemporaries. The last six thousand years have, of course, seen philosophy, both 'Eastern' and 'Western', go on to sustain vigorous, dynamic traditions. Indeed, one striking fact evidenced by history is the ubiquity of philosophical reflection.

Across the scope of human cultures, in different times and climes, one finds sustained philosophical reflection, on topics ranging from knowledge and justice, to society and education, to reality and meaning. Although philosophy, like any subject, has its 'boom and bust' periods, recent scholarship indicates that even periods previously considered to be rather barren – such as the 'Dark Ages' of medieval Europe – were, in fact, philosophically dynamic, even if their questions and problems reflected concerns rather different from ours.

The fact of the historical ubiquity of philosophy of course pleases those engaged in the 'business' of philosophy today. Certainly philosophers, whether professional or lay, should find a legitimate sense of pride in their participation in a venerable tradition of thought. This should include an appreciation of the sincere and sustained efforts, by men and women historically and culturally distant from us, to articulate ideas about their place in the 'order of things', which we may, today, profitably draw upon. And there isn't, one hopes, too much vainglory in the optimistic sentiment that philosophy has been, and continues to be, an ennobling feature of human life.

Although such sentiments have their place, the history of philosophy surely offers us more than just a sense of pride of one's place within a venerable tradition. Those things matter, if only to motivate, but the value of the history of philosophy should not be narrowly construed as a capacity to encourage young philosophers – those sitting through hardgoing undergraduate lectures on Kant, say – to 'keep at it' and work hard. A sense of 'standing on the shoulders of giants', to borrow Newton's handy phrase, is useful. But so, too, is one's knowing something about those 'giants' and about how, and why, they worked and wondered as they did.

In the history of philosophy, these 'giants' would be all those earlier thinkers whose work is now part of our shared history. Some of the giants are obvious and familiar, such as Plato or the Buddha, whereas others, like Nāgārjuna or Josiah Royce, remain reliably obscure, at least within certain areas of academic philosophy. Both familiarity and obscurity can be fickle things, of course. Some philosophical giants are prominent for their notoriety, like Nietzsche, and others for their accessibility, like Russell. But what does it mean to say that these figures, and others more like them, are part of a 'shared history', and how and why does that history matter?

The significance of the history of philosophy turns on the answer to that question. Certainly there are many reasons why one might not want to teach philosophy in a historical manner. One might prefer, for instance, to teach or write about philosophy in terms of 'problems' or discrete 'areas', like 'Metaphysics', 'Consciousness', or 'Topics in Philosophy of Science'. This way of philosophising focuses on topics, issues, and themes, like the nature of time, mental causation, or scientific methodology. And that can be a valuable and effective way of 'doing' philosophy, especially within the context of the structure of modern universities.

Yet a focus on abstract argument divorced from concrete context does, at least sometimes, compromise one's understanding and appreciation of the ideas and problems being discussed. One could, for instance, take a course on 'Knowledge and Scepticism', covering Pyrrho, Descartes, Kant and others, without ever detailing why, for each of those figures, questions about knowledge and scepticism mattered. An appeal to the inherent fascination or trickiness of their questions usually suffices, at least for those who opt to take such courses, but often those questions are presented without a clear account of why those philosophers were troubled by them. Most philosophers, at least in the past, were troubled by philosophical questions not simply out of mere curiosity, but rather because they

perceived that those questions, even the most abstract ones, had implications for aspects of life which *mattered* to them.

Such concerns are easily to neglect. A philosopher's 'position' can be summarised as an argument, or a series of bullet-points on a PowerPoint slide, but this format is apt to neglect the vital concerns that animated them. For instance, it often tends to obscure the biographical and historical context of a philosopher's life, reducing them to names and dates, of the form 'Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)'. Where, after all, is the contextual richness of a biography such as that which Heidegger offered for Aristotle: 'he was born ... he worked, and ... he died'. Heidegger may have been right that, for certain purposes, Aristotle's biography is not 'of interest', but that fact is only true at a certain level of analysis. Certainly it is not a general axiom of philosophizing.

Context is not only pedagogically or interpretively valuable. There are entertaining anecdotes in the history of philosophy, for sure – and not solely in the life of Ludwig Wittgenstein – but the value of historical context goes further than that. Showing the wider social and political conditions within which philosophers worked, worried and wondered can help us to appreciate their 'practical' objectives. The Presocratics offer interesting arguments against traditional Greek religion, but they were, ultimately, intended to facilitate social and political reform. Or to take a slightly later example, the Pyrrhonian sceptics did not engage in abstract epistemology, asking abstruse questions about the nature of knowledge, just because they were *interested*. Rather, it was because they perceived that a person who is to be happy must understand, first, what things are like and, second, how one should be disposed towards them. Put another way, they thought that knowledge of things was essential if we are to act properly regarding them, therefore interlinking epistemology and ethics in a way that will, one worries, remain invisible if one concentrated simply on the arguments themselves.

Many derisive assessments of the value of philosophy arise because, in many cases, those critics do not see how the 'abstract' issues raised by the philosophically-minded bear on 'practical' issues. The fault may be shared, but it can, I think, be partially resolved by an historical perspective upon philosophy. Once one becomes accustomed to a historical articulation of philosophy, the task of providing accounts of the 'practical' import of 'abstract' philosophising should become much easier. By being able to explain how earlier philosophers came to their ideas, or what provoked their questions, it should become easier for us to do the same for our own inquiries. And this should be understood, not as 'accounting for ourselves', but, rather, as explaining ourselves, for our benefit, and for that of our critics.

Certainly a knowledge and appreciation of the history of philosophy can be a valuable feature of the actual practice of philosophy. An understanding of philosophy as an historical discipline shows how it is bound up with social and political change, religious controversy, scientific innovation, and so on. Those sorts of issues are, of course, features of our world today; indeed, many philosophical questions are perennial in the sense that they return, each generation, often in evolving forms. Questions about beauty and art, justice and goodness, knowledge and certainty, and the like have featured within the public and private lives of human beings across all times and cultures. An historical understanding of the philosophers that responded to them can help us, today, in our own efforts to address them.

The history of philosophy is, therefore, a feature of philosophising itself. To ask and address philosophical questions is to enter into a longstanding tradition of inquiry. The specific content and form of philosophical questions changes over time, of course, in response to changing social and intellectual conditions. Questions about the certainty of knowledge, say, were changed by the development of the modern sciences. But appreciating this involves an historical sensitivity. It requires us to look not only at earlier philosophers who asked similar questions, but also at the

context within which those questions were asked. After all, it is often context which lends our questions urgency, vitality, and significance. There are many philosophical questions and puzzles, but which ones matter to us, and why, is as much a matter of history as it is of curiosity and inquiry.

The role of history in shaping our own ideas points to another role for the history of philosophy. Many questions face us, but not all of them matter to us. Certain questions move us, either by disturbing or fascinating us (or, indeed, both). Other questions are curiosities – interesting, but deemed neither urgent nor essential. Understanding the distribution of significance across the philosophical landscape will, again, require a historical perspective. After all, we are ourselves subjects of a history. To ape Nietzsche's famous remark, when we stare into history, history also stares back into us, insofar as the concerns and issues of contemporary society are products, at least in part, of that society's history – that is, of our history.

Such a reflexive historical stance is, of course, only useful beyond a certain point. We can get on much of the business of philosophising, debating and arguing without ever engaging in the historical project of tracing what Nietzsche called the 'genealogy' of our questions and methods. But that point at which history becomes essential is, I think, reached far sooner than is often imagined. Beyond a certain point, philosophical understanding must, if it is to satisfy us, become historically sensitive. This would include an understanding of how and why those questions came down to us, what presuppositions must be in place to enable our inquiries, and of why those questions and their answers matter to us.

A great deal of valuable philosophical work can proceed without the sort of historical understanding just described. A philosopher would be foolish to pursue a historical perspective where that would neither aid nor complement their concerns. Analytic philosophy, for instance, is often said to be largely 'ahistorical', but that is most often, I think, because its questions and concerns are not usually of the

sort of invite historical input. The salience of history depends upon the questions being asked and the kind of answers one is seeking.

My emphasis on the role of the history of philosophy is directed at those with more vital, 'practical' concerns. The refinement of a complex argument about logical relations might not invite historical reflection; but questions about the nature of 'the good life', for instance, surely are, for the reason that it is questions of this sort that are perennial, which appear across different cultures and generations. And it is, I suspect, such 'big questions' which command the interest and attention of most of those drawn to philosophy. It is these questions, and the richer conception of philosophy they reflect, which Kant had in mind when he wrote of the 'cosmopolitan sense' in philosophy, which issues in four questions: 'What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? What is man?'

The history of philosophy, then, is an essential feature of a certain broad conception of philosophy. It may be called cosmopolitan, after Kant, or 'humanistic', after Bernard Williams, or it may be judged, following Pierre Hadot, as a series of 'spiritual exercises' manifesting in a certain 'way of life'. Whatever its name, it is a conception of philosophy focused upon questions and concerns of vital importance to thinking, reflective human beings: questions of beauty, meaning, goodness, and the like, where these questions are understood, not as exercises in conceptual ingenuity, but as essential components of one's practical activities within the world. These questions are certainly not absent from ahistorical philosophising, but arguably they may be better served by an historical approach. Abstract reflection has a part to play in articulating and addressing these questions, but often they cannot be fully appreciated, or answered, without an historical appreciation of those earlier generations of philosophers who, troubled by similar worries, offered their own responses.

Sensitivity to the history of philosophy therefore offers resources for understanding that may be unavailable to

those who forsake context for raw argument. By neglecting the context of philosophical inquiry, one deprives many problems of their urgency and salience. Earlier philosophers, stripped of context, may seem peculiar, even perverse, for persisting in abstruse intellectual inquiries – about flux, haecceities, mind-body dualism, and the like. However to accuse them thus does them an injustice, and indicates, at the same time, our own ignorance. Once Cynic iconoclasm, say, or Cartesian dualism is located within its proper intellectual and historical context, their urgency and salience may be clarified and amplified. The result is, argue two recent writers, ‘the maturing of a kind of modesty or humility’, an ‘increased perception’ not only of the ‘presuppositions and prejudices of earlier eras’, but also an increased capacity, on our own part, to ‘expose similar presuppositions and prejudices that may be shaping beliefs and commitments today’.¹

Such a historical conception should also help protect philosophy from certain persistent and ill-informed challenges to it. Those who object that philosophy is ‘abstract’ and ‘detached’ often, I suspect, have certain caricatures of contemporary academic philosophy in mind. Certainly successive British Governments since Thatcher seem to have shared that view, the present one included. Other philosophers have also expressed worries about the deleterious impact of certain features of academic philosophy upon the genuine pursuit of philosophical inquiry. However, the objection that philosophy is detached is invalid because it relies upon a false conception of philosophy. That image of philosophy – as detached, abstract speculation, isolated from a practical context – would certainly make it difficult to see what, if anything, those speculations had to do with the world. However that conception of philosophy is dependent upon an ahistorical approach to the subject, one which strips it of context and isolates it from those ‘real-world’ concerns which animate it.

Reaffirming the contextual and historical nature of philosophy should also help to insure us against various vices.

The awareness that our problems are not new and that earlier generations also encountered them should encourage a certain humility on our own part. Only presentist hubris could persuade us that *our* predilections – our anxieties and insights – are privileged guides to the nature of reality. An appreciation of context should, one hopes, indicate that our anxieties and insights arise from ideas and developments which are not wholly of our making. Our achievements are, therefore, not ours alone. At the least, we owe a debt to both the errors and the insights of earlier generations, a debt which an understanding of the history of philosophy can help to make apparent.

There is ignorance, injustice and also ingratitude in the attitudes of those who deride the value of philosophy whilst living within a society so shaped by it. Voltaire urged us, when considering our history, to admire those who ‘first brought us to the path of truth’ as much as those ‘who afterwards conducted us through it’. To cherry-pick from the history of philosophy those figures whose views prefigure ours smacks of what historians of science call ‘Whig history’: a neglect of the role of critics, rival schools and the like in shaping the ideas that, from a parochial perspective, ‘won’ in the end. Failure to acknowledge those who brought us to our current path reflects badly upon us, especially if, as d’Alembert reminds us, we are but a ‘passing generation’, our concerns being, perhaps, ‘nothing for the next one, still less for distant posterity’.

Once a historical approach to philosophy is in place, that impoverished view of philosophy – and the stereotypes it sponsors, of philosophers as intellectual narcissists pre-occupied with their own uncertainties, say – should dissolve. There is a place for abstract reflection, for sure, but philosophy is, for many, necessarily rooted in the practical concerns of human beings who are, themselves, subjects of a history. Understanding that history will not only illuminate our contemporary concerns, but, one hopes, also renew our appreciation of philosophy. Our participation in that history will, at the least, enable us to do justice to

those who came before, and hopefully enable us to endow future generations, as best we can, with ideas which, in time, may be of use to those who follow us. At the very least, such historical philosophising brings with it a set of intellectual virtues – gratitude, humility, and justice – which lend it a moral as well as an intellectual significance.

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Note

¹ David E. Cooper and Peter S. Fosl (eds), *Philosophy: The Classic Readings*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xxiv–xxv.