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PHILOSOPHY AND ITS HISTORY

It is widely recognized that the history of philosophy is strikingly important to the field of philosophy. The history of philosophy virtually always plays a role in philosophical training, and frequently figures quite prominently in it. Moreover, many whose intellectual interests are primarily philosophical devote themselves to studying the history of philosophy. And philosophical issues whose point is not at all historical are often cast in terms of discussions drawn from the history of philosophy.

Though it is indisputable that the history of philosophy is important to philosophy, it is far less clear why that should be so. The difficulty is that it is also generally agreed that philosophy is fundamentally a search for solutions to particular problems. Philosophical activity is not restricted just to the solving of problems, but the attempt to solve a certain range of problems is that main mark that distinguishes philosophical work from other forms of intellectual activity. Just what problems fall within this range is not easy to specify in a way that is at once accurate and informative. But we recognize such problems fairly readily, partly by way of family resemblances, and partly because philosophical problems usually involve relatively abstract issues that other, more easily defined disciplines typically ignore.

Most philosophers today operate with roughly this conception of their field. This is evident both in their actual work and in the judgments they make about its success and failure. Indeed, this view of philosophy has dominated the writings of virtually all those past authors whose work we regard as paradigmatically philosophical.

It typically goes unnoticed, however, that this conception of philosophy is uncommonly hard to square with the strong and abiding interest philosophers have in the history of their field. The views of past philosophers may sometimes be helpful in current efforts to solve philosophical problems, by suggesting strategies for solving them or by pointing up pit-

falls and fallacies to avoid. But such benefits hardly seem proportionate to the central importance to philosophy of its own history. Why, if philosophy is mainly the solving of problems, would the history of such efforts be a well-established part of the field, and such a central part of philosophical training? Why wouldn't past successes simply be seen as part of our current philosophical knowledge, rather than as a reason to study the past works themselves? Why, moreover, do so many with distinctively philosophical interests study those past works, rather than devote themselves directly to the problems that define the field? Indeed, why should the history of philosophy be studied, as it is, almost exclusively by those whose training and interests are philosophical, rather than historical? Satisfactory answers to these quandaries are not readily forthcoming if philosophy is essentially a problem-solving activity.

One response to this difficulty would be to contest the apparent data that seem to lead to it. Thus one might insist that, despite appearances, the history of philosophy is not actually all that important to philosophical work. Or one might, instead, deny that philosophy is a discipline whose main goal is to solve problems. Both the problem-solving conception of philosophy and the importance of its history seem well established. But perhaps a coherent view demands that we deny one or the other.

There is another, more elaborate way in which emphasizing the history of philosophy can lead to doubts about the problem-solving paradigm. Historicists from R. G. Collingwood to Alasdair MacIntyre have forcefully urged that philosophical problems arise in particular intellectual contexts, which give those problems whatever point they have. If one presses hard on the idea that philosophical problems are in this way creatures of their historical contexts, such problems may no longer seem to have any independent standing as serious intellectual concerns. The problem-solving paradigm would come to seem like just a self-serving piece of mythology philosophers promulgate in order to keep their field alive. Such uncompromising historicism can thus undermine the idea that the real goal of philosophy is to solve problems. It is roughly this challenge to the traditional conception of philosophy that Richard Rorty has developed, most impressively in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, but also in *Consequences of Pragmatism* and other recent writings.¹

My principal goal in what follows is to explain the importance to philosophy of its history, given that philosophy is at bottom a problem-solving discipline. Before taking up that task, however, I confront the challenge to the problem-solving picture posed by extreme historicism of the sort Rorty advances. In section I, I set out Rorty's historicist argument against the view that philosophy is devoted to the solving of problems. I

then show in section II that such historicism does not undermine the problem-solving picture of philosophy, and that Rorty's historicism and the alternative picture he gives of philosophy rely on a double standard that affects his historicist accounts. In section III, then, I turn to the general significance to philosophy of its history. And I take up the usual explanations of the importance to philosophy of its history, and argue that they are inadequate. In section IV I conclude by arguing that the history of philosophy has special importance to philosophy because understanding philosophical views and arriving at the truth about philosophical issues necessarily go hand in hand. The history of philosophy has distinctively philosophical importance because we must confront, and think through, philosophical issues in order to interpret any other person's philosophical position, and thus to interpret any philosophical position from the past.

I. RORTY'S ELIMINATIVIST HISTORICISM

It is sometimes held that philosophy is defined by a set of distinctive problems that are eternal and perennial. Such problems would inevitably command the attention of philosophers in every era, unless and until they are decisively solved. As Rorty notes, this view is widely presupposed in standard texts on the history of philosophy.² Rorty sees this kind of history as reflecting the idea, dominant in such texts, "that 'philosophy' is the name of a natural kind—the name of a discipline which, in all ages and places, has managed to dig down to the same deep fundamental questions" (p. 63).

But such standard texts are not the main source of the idea that philosophy addresses perennial problems. Rather, that idea derives its force principally from the way philosophers themselves typically discuss their philosophical predecessors. It is natural to represent one's predecessors in terms of the issues that animate one's own work and dominate current discussion. So previous philosophers come across as having posed and addressed the very problems that are central to those current debates.

This way with our predecessors is hardly peculiar to the present day. Kant and Aristotle gave such accounts of their philosophical forebears, accounts that were so impressive, systematic, and illuminating that they have served as models for successive generations. Even Hegel, who notoriously saw philosophical thought as having systematically evolved, tacitly read current issues into the past. For he depicted previous philosophers as having posed questions whose true meaning we can grasp only in terms of the subsequent problems. Earlier problems are, in effect, dialectically in-

complete versions of the truer questions that Hegel himself addressed, and can be fully and correctly understood only in terms of them. I argue in later sections that this way of representing one's predecessors is both natural and fruitful, and indeed to a great extent inevitable. But whatever the case about that, so describing one's intellectual ancestors plainly fosters the impression that they shared with us a concern with problems that are perennial.

But we should be cautious about what we conclude from this practice of representing past philosophers as having addressed problems of current concern. That practice may more reflect the way we represent others' views than any eternal character of the problems addressed. Moreover, there are compelling reasons to reject the idea of perennial philosophical problems. The problems philosophers in different eras address typically resemble one another in many ways, but they are seldom exactly the same. As many from Dewey to Rorty have urged, these problems arise in the context of particular intellectual and social situations, and at various stages in the acquisition of relevant knowledge. These contexts are crucial for understanding the intellectual hold the philosophical problems of the day exert on us; to that extent, these contexts partly define just what those problems are. To view problems apart from context inevitably results in distortion. This distortion is often evident in the accounts philosophers give of their predecessors. It is most dramatic when contemporaneous accounts of previous philosophers diverge in ways that reflect philosophical differences between those giving the accounts.

To this extent, it is quite plausible to adopt a historicist view about philosophical problems. Indeed, even within a particular era, problems may be less similar than they appear at first sight, in part because of divergence of relevant intellectual context. But this much historicism in no way threatens the problem-solving paradigm of philosophy. Indeed, it would be surprising, on that view of philosophical activity, if the problems did not shift and evolve. Efforts to solve problems will presumably sometimes yield definite results—occasionally decisive solutions, perhaps more often refinements in formulations and clarifications of presuppositions. When such progress occurs, however modestly, the problems we address will change. If, with Russell, we see philosophical problems as truly perennial, we shall have to deny, as he was led to, that such problems are susceptible to any sort of solution at all.³

If philosophical problems are motivated in part by concerns specific to the intellectual or social context in which they arise, a shift in context will very likely induce a corresponding shift in the problems addressed. This change might occur even when the earlier problems are not thought to have been satisfactorily solved. When concerns that led us to pose certain

questions no longer capture our attention, the problems themselves will come to seem artificial and unmotivated. If those problems continue to receive attention, debates about competing solutions will seem pointless and idle, and the proposed solutions mere intellectual exercises. Such philosophical work will no longer reflect our desire to learn something new or deepen our understanding of things.

It is Rorty's contention that exactly this situation obtains today. The problems about mind, knowledge, and meaning that have dominated, and even defined modern philosophy derive, he argues, from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century concerns that no longer have any hold on us. Philosophical discussion about these topics now have that artifactual air typical of attempts to solve pointless problems. Rather than continue to emulate the efforts of past thinkers to find satisfactory solutions, Rorty concludes we should simply stop addressing those problems at all. Parts One and Two of *PMN* advance this view in detail.

If Rorty is right that the problems central to modern philosophy have become idle, we might expect those problems eventually to be reformulated, or even replaced by new questions that better reflect the concerns of the day. Such shifts have occurred before, and it is natural to suppose that occasionally they will again.

It is here, however, that Rorty's historicism is most radical. If one notices that the scholasticisms of one period repeatedly give way to problems newly formulated by a later generation, one may eventually come to see all such problems as transitory cultural phenomena, and thus question the value of trying to solve them. And if philosophical concerns pass only when problems come to seem pointless, and not because we find convincing solutions, one may well doubt whether such solutions are possible. Accordingly, Rorty sees the passing of today's outmoded problems as leading not to new, livelier ones, but to the end of philosophy, conceived of as a problem-solving discipline. His eliminativist exhortations extend beyond the present concerns of philosophy to the problem-solving picture of philosophy itself. Two eliminativist paths are possible. We can come to think of philosophy in non-problem-solving terms, as he recommends in Part Three of *PMN* or, equivalently, we can abandon philosophy altogether and enter a "post-Philosophical culture", as he foresees in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (xxxvii–xliv). Like Marx, Rorty hopes that by becoming aware of the pattern that has so far governed our passage from one historical stage to the next, we shall at last become able to break free of that pattern.⁴

Its revolutionary aims notwithstanding, Rorty's historicist stance has a fair measure of intuitive appeal. Philosophers disagree dramatically about central issues. Despite the central role of reasoning in philosophical

activity, these disagreements are rarely resolved by rational argument. Indeed, it is striking how seldom argument leads anybody actually to change sides in a debate. Disagreements that seem impervious to argument occur in all fields when issues of overarching theoretical significance arise. But such disagreements seem virtually epidemic in philosophy. It is hard to imagine how we could make sense of "those astounding differences of philosophic belief that", as John Dewey noted, often "startle the beginner and become the plaything of the expert".⁵ Such disagreements, moreover, occur at all levels of abstraction, leaving little common ground for disputants to fall back on. These considerations make it inviting to hold, with Rorty, that the issues themselves must be pointless and idle. Describing the issues historically heightens that intuition. To see an issue as a part of our historical past is, to some extent, automatically to see it as lacking genuine current concern.⁶

But such general considerations are by themselves hardly compelling. Philosophical discussions add little to our knowledge or understanding if we measure such progress by whether the adherents of one position are converted to another. But from the perspective of a particular school, whose members adhere to a position that remains reasonably stable, such discussions often lead to substantial advances in our command over the relevant issues. Nor is philosophy unlike other fields in this respect. Rival research programs typically seem relatively sterile to one another, no matter what the field. The ability to represent an issue as merely historical, moreover, is hardly a reliable guide to its cognitive status. Historicizing an issue that still arouses active concern is little more than an oblique way of wishing it didn't.

But Rorty does not rest his case on such considerations. Rather, he devotes much of *PMN* to extended accounts of contemporary philosophical discussions of mind, knowledge, and language, and the historical backgrounds that led to them, in order to show that the issues these discussions turn on are, after all, idle. It will suffice to consider his treatment, in Part One, of the mind-body problem, since the other two cases follow the same pattern of argument.

II. THE SELF-DEFEATING DOUBLE STANDARD

On Rorty's account, we can understand the modern mind-body problem only if we see that there are at least two ways of talking about things on which no such problem arises. One involves the concept of mind Rorty believes we had before Descartes. Prior to Descartes, Rorty holds, 'mind' meant pretty much the same as 'reason'. On this conception, the modern

mind-body problem cannot get going, since that problem rests on puzzles about consciousness, incorrigibility, and transparency, and these puzzles do not arise in connection with reasoning. This pre-Cartesian conception of mind gave rise instead to the Aristotelian problem of how concrete bodily creatures can grasp universals (38–51). Descartes, however, led us to apply 'mental' to perceiving and feeling, as well as reasoning. But the only thing these three have in common is that we know about them incorrigibly (47–63). We thus came to think of the mind as that with respect to which "there is no distinction between appearance and reality", whereas for everything nonmental how something appears can diverge from how it really is (55). According to Rorty, we owe the modern mind-body problem to a decision by Descartes to use the word 'mental' in this new, extended way.⁷

The other way of talking that avoids the modern mind-body problem is that of the mythical Antipodeans Rorty describes, who operate not with a concept of mind different from ours, but with no such concept at all (72). Rorty argues, on the whole quite persuasively, that the Antipodeans can describe and explain things just as well as we can. They seem to diverge from us only in being unable to grasp the mind-body problem that Terran explorers try to explain to them.

If that mind-body problem derives just from Descartes's innovative application of the term 'mental', Rorty is right to see that problem as artifactual. And if the Antipodeans' only conceptual shortcoming is their inability to enter into our mind-body debates, we will be right to regard those debates with suspicion.

There are many places in Rorty's historical account that are open to scholarly challenge. Indeed, he explicitly concedes as much (e.g., p. 51, fn. 21 and p. 53, fn. 23). But his principal aim is to historicize the main problems of modern philosophy—to see them as creatures of a particular cultural development rather than as independent intellectual quandaries. For this purpose, scholarly accuracy is arguably less important than a measure of general plausibility.

But even given his historicist aims, Rorty's story often lacks plausibility. As he insists, pre-Cartesians had relatively little interest in the mind-body problem as we know it. But interest did not arise because of any redefinition of our concepts. However pre-Cartesians may have used such terms as *nous* and 'mens', they plainly often grouped thinking and perceiving together. Indeed, Aristotle himself insists that thinking and reasoning actually involve perceptual imagination (e.g., *de Anima* III 7 431b2 and III 8 432a5–14), a view which before Descartes was widely endorsed. And despite his broad sense of *psuche*, he connects no other faculties in this strong way.

Moreover, there is a more widely accepted and more convincing account of how the mind-body problem came to exert its hold on us. Post-Galilean science aims at explanation by means of laws expressed with mathematical precision. Such laws are thought to provide the key to understanding the nature of the physical reality thus explained. Since the quality of colors and sounds intuitively resist such treatment, we ordinarily explain those qualities as actually mental qualities caused by physical processes that are themselves describable in mathematical terms. Once relocated in the mind, such qualities no longer threaten the sovereignty of mathematically formulated laws in the physical realm. Thinking too seems to defy description in terms of mathematically precise laws.⁸ Because thinking and perceiving thus resist inclusion within modern mathematical physics, how these phenomena fit with the rest of nature automatically becomes starkly problematic.⁹

This explanation undermines Rorty's suggestion that the mind-body problem arose from a relatively arbitrary terminological innovation, rather than from well-motivated intellectual concerns. Moreover, these concerns continue to be pressing today. A reduction of all natural phenomena to those of mathematical physics seems even more likely today than it did in the seventeenth century, but the brute qualitative character of color and sound seems as unyielding as ever to such treatment. Perhaps that is why physicists and neurologists often regard the mind-body problem as far more intractable than philosophers.¹⁰

On Rorty's account, Descartes so redescribed things that thought and perception came to be seen as at bottom the same kind of phenomenon. The reclassification was, according to Rorty, so novel and so unnatural that it called for some special explanation. Only the incorrigibility both phenomena putatively share would do, and that came to define the new concept of mind. The mind-body problem is basically the problem of how states that are incorrigibly known can fit with the rest of nature. The Antipodeans believe nothing is known incorrigibly, and that is why they lack any concept of mind. On this story, the mind-body problem is of course pointless. How can one take seriously a puzzle that turns solely on an avoidable reclassification of things or an arbitrary definition of terms?

On theories of mind inspired by Descartes, mental states are incorrigibly known, and nothing else is. But it hardly follows, even on those theories, that the mental is by definition incorrigible. There is considerable controversy about whether mind is incorrigibly known at all, and if so, what that incorrigibility amounts to. If it were definitionally incorrigible, such controversy would be literally incoherent. Cartesians and their opponents differ here about the correct theory of mind, not about their definitions of 'mental'. Nor can Rorty's historicism make it plausible to define

mind in terms of incorrigibility. How we explain our classifying thought and perception together hinges on the position we take about the mind-body problem.¹¹

Part of what leads Rorty to see incorrigibility as defining the mind-body problem is a peculiar asymmetry about the solutions people put forth. If one follows Descartes about the incorrigibility of the mental, mind will be a singularity in nature, and its relation to the rest of reality will be problematic. By contrast, if one denies incorrigibility, there may seem to be no problem about the mind-body relation. So it may be tempting to insist that the mind-body problem arises only on the assumption that mental states are actually incorrigible.

If so, nobody could rationally hope to solve the mind-body problem. Because they deny incorrigibility, materialists reject a presupposition of the problem itself. Cartesians capture the presupposition, but by doing so definitionally assign the mind an irretrievably problematic status. On this picture, the mind-body problem is plainly idle and spurious.

But this line of reasoning conflates what it is for us to have a problem with what it is for something to be problematic. The mind-body problem is the problem of explaining how the mental fits in with nonmental reality. All this problem presupposes is a tenable distinction between what is mental and what is not, and that we have not yet satisfactorily articulated the relations between them. That problem may very well exist regardless of whether the relation between the two turns out to be problematic. Problems exist relative to our state of knowledge; their existence implies only that we have more to learn, not that the relevant phenomena are themselves somehow problematic. Accordingly, the mind-body problem in no way presupposes that mind is incorrigible.

The Cartesian theory of mind has dominated philosophical discussion since the seventeenth century. And Rorty sensibly insists that any distinction between conceptual and factual components of what we say will inevitably be arbitrary (e.g., 169). So perhaps he is entitled to redescribe certain central claims of our dominant theory as though they are features of our very concept of mind. Insofar as we define mind in terms of the Cartesian theory, the mind-body problem will indeed presuppose incorrigibility. We thus end up construing the mind-body problem in terms of the dominant theory advanced to solve that problem, in effect understanding, as Collingwood urged we must, the problem in terms of the solution given it.¹²

Redescribing theoretical doctrines as conceptual connections is innocuous as long as we treat the two types of description as interchangeable.¹³ So Rorty's claim that the mind-body problem presupposes incorrigibility is unobjectionable if all it means is that our dominant theory asserts such

incorrigibility. But having traded theory in for concept, Rorty goes on to avail himself of the putative privileged character of conceptual connections. Rorty sees the Antipodean denial of incorrigibility as indicating that they have no concept of mind. But if all it meant to say that mind is definitionally incorrigible is that the dominant philosophical theory says it is, the Antipodean denial must count as a coherent alternative solution to the mind-body problem, rather than an avoidance or rejection of it. We have no more reason to think the Antipodeans lack a concept of mind because they regard nothing as incorrigibly reportable than that we now lack a concept of species because we no longer believe that biological kinds are immutable.

This point emerges especially vividly in connection with W. V. Quine's well-known remarks about prelogical peoples. Suppose we translated a language in such a way that some sentences that native speakers generally assent to got rendered as simple, explicit contradictions, say, of the form 'p & ~p'. This, Quine convincingly argues, would count overwhelmingly against the correctness of that translation. What evidence could ever convince us to accept this absurd result? "[P]re-logicality," Quine concludes, "is a trait injected by bad translators."¹⁴

Rorty's Antipodean story invites much the same challenge. The Antipodeans' conceptual resources largely match ours. Indeed, they describe their own behavior and ours along pretty much the same lines we ourselves would use. They diverge from us, Rorty holds, only in denying that reports of anything are every incorrigible. Rorty believes this denial shows they lack a concept of mind. Why doesn't that conclusion simply show that Rorty has mistranslated his own Antipodeans? What evidence could a translator confronting such people invoke that would sustain this strange consequence? Is it even intelligible to us that a people should describe their own behavior much as we do, but lack any concept of mind? Rorty's description rests on his having transformed the Cartesian doctrine that mental events are incorrigibly reportable into a conceptual truth. This transformation is not only gratuitous; it is unmotivated relative to the task of accurately translating the Antipodeans' remarks into our terms. It thus closes off the natural way of understanding them: they count as mental just those things which we do, but deny the Cartesian theory that reports of them are incorrigible.

Rorty contends we cannot correctly so describe the Antipodeans. Rather, we must resist attributing to them any philosophical view whatever, even materialism in its eliminativist form (118–19; cf. 114–25). If we ever became like the Antipodeans—if, that is, "we could ever just drop the whole cluster of images which Antipodeans do not share with us," that

would not entitle us "to infer that [materialism] had triumphed..." (123).

Rorty's reason for this is that he believes materialism cannot triumph, since 'mental' and 'physical' are incompatible terms (121). This pronouncement about 'mental' and 'physical' is surprising, since Rorty has at that point just repudiated the essentialism about "the terms 'sensation', 'mental', and the like", which he concedes underlay his own earlier arguments against standard materialism (120, fn. 24). But in any case 'mental' and 'physical' are not incompatible. Rather, we contrast the mental with the physical because we use 'physical' idiomatically as a variable term of contrast. The physical is, depending on context, whatever is not mental, or not distinctively chemical, or not living. We contrast physical versions of things with computer simulations, even though, considered on their own, these very simulations are of course paradigmatically physical. In each case, 'physical' applies to phenomena at lower levels of organization than the one we are focusing on. The mental-physical contrast seems to have special significance only because no well-defined level of organization exists higher than the mental.¹⁵ But this use of 'physical' to mark contrasts in no case implies anything about the nature of the phenomena under consideration.¹⁶

Rorty's double standard on these issues emerges even more clearly in connection with his discussion of incommensurability, which is central to the historicist picture he advances. Rorty sees intellectual revolutions of the sort Descartes provoked as giving rise to discussions incommensurable with those of the previous era. Pre-Cartesian views are not commensurable with our own, nor are ours with the Antipodeans'. Similarly, today's philosophical work would be incommensurable with intellectual activity in the "post-Philosophical culture" Rorty envisages (365–73).

Rorty borrows much here from the well-known work of Thomas S. Kuhn.¹⁷ But Rorty insists it is a mistake to follow Kuhn and others in construing incommensurability as a matter of whether the discussions under consideration are mutually translatable. For he endorses Donald Davidson's convincing critique of the notion of alternative conceptual schemes (259–73). As Davidson argues, we can make sense of somebody's having a particular conceptual scheme at all only to the extent to which we can render that scheme within our own. But a scheme translatable into our terms cannot qualify as an alternative to our scheme.¹⁸

Because of these difficulties about the notion of alternative conceptual schemes, Rorty transforms incommensurability from a thesis about meanings of terms into a thesis about people's beliefs. "To say that parties to a controversy 'use terms in different ways,'" he writes, "seems to me an unenlightening way of describing the fact that they cannot find a way of

agreeing on what would settle the issue" (316, fn. 1). Rather, we should say discussions are commensurable if they can "be brought under a set of rules which would tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict" (316).

But, as already indicated, when Rorty describes actual cases of incommensurability, he reverts to meanings of terms. Descartes brought about an intellectual revolution "by verbal maneuvers which reshuffled the deck slightly" (58). And, in general, "no [intellectual] can succeed which employs a vocabulary commensurable with the old, and thus none can succeed by employing arguments which make unequivocal use of terms shared with the traditional wisdom" (58, fn. 28). Moreover, just as equivocal terminology affects the interface between pre- and post-Cartesian discourse, issues of translatability separate us from Rorty's Antipodeans. The reason they have difficulty grasping our mind-body problem is that "they had so much trouble translating the [Terran] background reading necessary to appreciate the problem" (73).

It is not surprising that Rorty falls back on meanings of terms to describe cases of incommensurability. If incommensurability were just the inability of disputants to agree on rational means for settling their differences, it would not be a rare occurrence characteristic of intellectual revolutions but a constant fact of intellectual life. Rorty adapts Kuhn's distinction between normal and abnormal science in an effort to sustain the connection between incommensurability, so construed, and intellectual revolutions.

[N]ormal discourse is that which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it. Abnormal discourse is what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions or who sets them aside (320).

So understood, however, normal discourse is hardly typical of intellectual exchanges within a particular period. Rather, it occurs only between those who hold essentially similar views. Discourse between contemporary Cartesians and materialists is affected by this kind of incommensurability no less than discourse between pre- and post-Cartesians or between the Antipodeans and us. Incommensurability so construed is simply the commonplace noted above that the arguments of opponents seldom lead philosophers to change their minds.

For Rorty's historicist picture to have any force, the break between pre- and post-Cartesians and between the Antipodeans and ourselves must be substantially greater than the distance that separates contemporaries with

opposing views. This is highly implausible if we measure these distances by reference to the beliefs held by each group; contemporary philosophers often disagree just as heartily as do those on different sides of intellectual revolutions. These revolutions will seem special only if described in terms of translatability or equivocal terminology. Once again Rorty's argument trades on seeing things in terms of meanings rather than beliefs.

If we cannot make clear sense of the idea that others differ from us conceptually,¹⁹ historicist contrasts will be hard to sustain. All disagreement will then be just a matter of divergent beliefs. What divides us from our contemporaries will be the same sort of thing as what divides us from our predecessors. Even more important, we shall have to construe others, of whatever era, in the terms we use to formulate our own beliefs. It is thus unavoidable that we treat our differences with our intellectual ancestors in just the way we treat contemporary disagreements.

Rorty's avowed goal is to get us to stop trying to solve philosophical problems. But it is difficult to make clear sense of this goal in a way that retains its radical air, and also keeps it from collapsing into the traditional aims of philosophical activity. Philosophers typically propound solutions to problems. And nobody continues to work on problems they believe have been solved. So we might try to make sense of Rorty's radical program by noting that he, unlike traditional thinkers, wants us to put these problems behind us not because we think we have solved them, but simply because we have lost interest in them.

But this will not do. As indicated above, Rorty sometimes seems to urge jettisoning a problem because no solution is possible. To show this is not literally to solve the problem. But this move figures centrally in traditional work. Locke and Kant, among others, made familiar the idea that knowledge may have certain limits, and some problems no solution. Rorty also seeks to undermine problems by challenging their presuppositions, but this too is a traditional technique, again widely associated with Kant.

Occasionally Rorty appeals to considerations that have no distinctively intellectual standing.²⁰ These appeals plainly differ from traditional methods for resolving problems. But *PMN* also contains a rich tapestry of argument. So occasional nonintellectual appeals will not suffice to differentiate Rorty's approach. Rorty would doubtless insist that his arguments are meant not to resolve problems but to show only how insubstantial they are and how little hinges on what solution one gives. But this kind of critique still falls within the range philosophers traditionally embrace.

Perhaps what makes Rorty's approach radical is the attitude he hopes to engender, rather than the methods he employs. We should regard philosophical problems, he urges, not as issues of serious concern, but as his-

torical curiosities. Our interest in them should be the kind we have in historical events: how they arose, what sustained them, and why they declined. The right attitude will be that of the detached outsider, not that of the insider for whom those problems have force. We should end up with the sense that those problems never had any real bite.

But any satisfactory resolution of a problem will have that effect. Once a problem has been satisfactorily resolved, we adopt an outsider's attitude towards it. Once we know our way around the relevant issues, those problems no longer evoke a sense of mystery. As Nelson Goodman observes, when we try "in philosophy to make the obscure obvious . . . the reward of success is banality. An answer, once found, is obvious."²¹

Intellectual activity, like everything else, has its fashions. Interests can shift because something else catches our fancy, or just because something no longer holds our attention. But it is not easy to produce a clear case of a problem we have abandoned despite our still regarding it as unresolved. Even when no decisive resolution has won general acceptance, we normally drop a problem only when it has yielded sufficiently for us to understand the issues reasonably well. When a problem is prematurely dropped its demise is typically short-lived; it will attract the attention of subsequent generations. Because unresolved problems have a way of being rediscovered, Rorty's revolutionary shift, in which philosophy no longer focuses on solving problems, is unlikely to occur until the main problems of philosophy are satisfactorily resolved.

III. WHY STUDY THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY?

One sure way to kill a cultural movement is to write its history. Rendering an idea, movement, or cause historical defuses its energy and mutes its impact. To be sure, tracing the historical development of a flagging cultural movement can revitalize it. Knowing the history of a movement can highlight connections with present concerns, thereby kindling new interest in it. But more often the history of a movement serves as a kind of epitaph. Seeing events as belonging to history induces a kind of detachment and a sense of having moved beyond them. Historicist descriptions can thus be useful for trying to alter the course of cultural or intellectual activity. Moreover, this effect is in general wholly independent of any theoretical bias or issue of interpretation that may color the historical account one offers. A historical perspective about philosophical problems is thus ideally suited to the rhetorical needs of Rorty's radical metaphilosophical picture.

Historicist arguments are not likely, however, to help much in circum-

venting active debate about issues of current concern. We are all understandably reluctant to see ourselves as belonging to an era whose time has past. So participants in contemporary debate can hardly be expected to yield more readily to the historicist's suggestion that their work is outmoded or idle than to the arguments of their opponents. And the natural desire to make recognizable contributions will lead most to be cautious about disregarding the debates of the day. Descartes, possibly the most successful philosophical revolutionary ever, took great care to cast things in terms of debates then current.

Moreover, historicism is unlikely to achieve anything we could not accomplish equally well by standard, nonhistoricist means. As section II illustrates, success in historicizing an issue generally relies obliquely on considerations and arguments that are more effective when brought to bear directly on the issue at hand. Describing issues in historicist terms is therefore typically idle; historicist arguments can generally be readily reconstrued as direct, ahistorical arguments about the merits of the case.

The natural reluctance to see one's work as outmoded provides a powerful incentive to construe the arguments of historicists ahistorically. But there is another reason for such reconstrual that is less open to a charge of self-interest. We typically succeed better in understanding others if we assume, as far as possible, that they are addressing issues and talking in terms that are familiar to us from our own thought. Historicist efforts to influence the direction of intellectual activity trades on evoking a sense of discontinuity between different intellectual styles or movements. Our natural desire to understand others conflicts with that picture, since understanding implies bridging such apparent discontinuities.

This tendency to reconstrue historicist arguments in ahistoricist terms reflects a deep-seated attitude philosophers have toward the history of their field. Histories of philosophy typically portray past philosophers as though they were contemporaries, whose work is animated by much the same issues and interests as our own. Such histories tend to abstract from, or ignore, the details of historical context—often even from the intellectual climate of an era—and to construe the writings of past philosophers solely in terms of the issues addressed.

Because most history of philosophy is written by philosophers rather than historians, it may be unsurprising that the resulting histories are relatively ahistorical in orientation. But here again there is an intellectually more respectable reason for our ahistorical tendencies. A certain distance inevitably separates the historian from the historical subject. This is due in part to the historian's desire for objectivity, which may suggest striving for a neutral viewpoint, or at least a viewpoint independent of the historical subject's. But this distance arises also from the tendency of history to

focus on the unusual and striking. Historical explanation adds little to our understanding if the events explained seem mundane to us. We need such explanation only when an event or movement is not immediately intelligible. Only in these cases will the historian's appeal to antecedent influences and surrounding circumstances help us understand why the event occurred, or why somebody held an idea.

But understanding why somebody thought something is not the same as understanding the thought itself. And distinctively historical explanation seldom helps much in understanding past ideas themselves, as opposed to why they were held. Indeed, historical discussions often seem almost to assume that the idea in question may not, in its own terms, be wholly explicable, and so often try instead to explain only why somebody would have thought such a thing.

To understand the thought itself, by contrast, requires that one be able to imagine having that thought oneself. If we have no good idea of what reasons a person would give for thinking something, and how those reasons would fit with beliefs of ours about related matters, we will have little grasp of what that thought is. If our goal is understanding the ideas others have had, rather than why they held them, we will try as much as possible to see those ideas in terms of our own. This is so even when we discover important discontinuities that separate us from past thinkers. We can understand such discontinuities by reference to how we, today, think about the issues in question.

Needless to say, the ahistorical and historical approaches to understanding complement, rather than compete with each other. We often need explanation by reference to antecedent circumstances; only thus could we account, e.g., for the nearly universal concern among seventeenth-century thinkers with the impact of the new science on old, commonsense ways of describing things. But antecedent events are unlikely to do much to explain why Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, or Locke held the particular doctrines they did. Here we must try to understand the thoughts ahistorically, in terms of the considerations one can rationally adduce in support of those views, and thus by reference to our own conceptions of what counts as a rational consideration. The understanding of our intellectual past must unavoidably be partly 'Whiggish', in that we must use our own thought as the main reference point in terms of which we find the past intelligible. This consideration will figure later in this section, and centrally in the argument in section IV.

This circumstance is not unique to philosophy, but applies equally to the history of the natural sciences and mathematics. We inevitably must understand past scientific theories and mathematical reasoning in terms of the best thought available today. Accordingly, the history of such fields,

like that of philosophy, is typically pursued not by historians, but by those with the relevant specialist's training.

But philosophy is quite different from the sciences and mathematics in respect of the relationship each field has to its history. Unlike the history of philosophy, the histories of mathematics and the sciences are not integral parts of those disciplines. Mathematicians and scientists do, in the course of their training, acquire some, often anecdotal, historical knowledge of discoveries in their fields. But the systematic study of that history does not figure in standard professional training in those fields, and studying the work of past mathematicians and scientists rarely has much impact on current research.

By contrast, as noted at the outset, the history of philosophy is one of the major areas of study included in virtually all philosophical training. This has been so even when the dominant school or tradition has conceived of philosophical knowledge on the model of knowledge in mathematics or the sciences. By this standard, the history of philosophy is not regarded as independent of the study of philosophy itself, nor even as a mere adjunct to it, but is seen instead as important, even integral, to philosophical work itself.

In this respect, philosophy is more like the humanistic disciplines than the sciences. Whatever one's interests in literature, music, or the arts, training in these fields invariably includes a grounding in the history of such work. Indeed, much of what we study in these areas, as in philosophy, is the great work of the past. Not only is the history of humanistic fields central to the fields themselves, as it is in philosophy; the study of this history is often pursued in a somewhat similar spirit. The main impetus behind studying these great past works is frequently their ahistorical value as works of literature, music, and art, and not their position in the historical context that produced them.

Philosophy thus shares important features with both the sciences and the humanities. Because the history of philosophy counts as an integral part of philosophy itself, philosophy thus far resembles the humanistic disciplines. But like the sciences, the guiding aim of philosophy is arriving at the truth about particular matters. This is not to say that the humanities have no interest in truth; but truth is only one among many goals in humanistic studies. The dominant aim there is rather understanding—understanding the great works of literature, music, and art, and understanding what makes them great. Philosophy, mathematics, and the sciences, by contrast, formulate specific problems to solve, and issues we want settled. Our goal is to arrive at true answers to specific questions. Philosophy does, of course, also aim at understanding; indeed, many would characterize philosophy primarily in terms of that goal. Still, all would agree that

the goal of philosophy is not, in the first instance, to understand the great works of philosophy, but to understand how things are. Philosophical understanding is understanding the nature of things, not the meanings of texts.²²

This dual character of philosophy—resembling the sciences in some ways and the humanities in others—is reflected in traditional, widely held views about the field. Since Aristotle, philosophers as diverse as Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Hegel have classified philosophy as a kind of theoretical knowledge, like mathematics and the natural sciences. But since Plato the complex and ambiguous kinship philosophy has to literature has also loomed large, a kinship reflected in the prevailing contemporary classification of philosophy with the humanities. Rorty's views can thus be seen as an effort to resolve the tensions inherent in this dual character by undermining the comparison with science. Success would thus yield exactly the result Rorty envisages: a humanistic model for philosophy, unencumbered by the strictures imposed by a search after truth. The arguments in section II against Rorty's revolutionary goals in effect restored that balance, by appealing to the ineliminable interest philosophers have in discovering and understanding the truth about things.

These considerations again point to the question raised at the outset: why, if philosophy is essentially a problem-solving discipline, is the history of philosophy so important to philosophical work? There are a number of standard answers that are given to this question, some of which may seem to help in explaining this apparently anomalous concern of philosophy with its own history. But these standard explanations all raise difficult questions in turn. And none seems able to explain why the history of philosophy should actually count as an integral part of philosophy, rather than merely an occasionally useful adjunct. The rest of this section will try to show this by briefly surveying these standard explanations.²³

It is sometimes said that the history of philosophy is important to philosophy because the works of the past great philosophers can be a source of ideas useful for current work. Past philosophical work can be suggestive about how to formulate or solve present problems. Aristotle's influence is often evident, e.g., in the work of J. L. Austin. But salutary as such input can be, ideas for solutions, arguments, and formulations come from many sources. Austin arguably derived at least as much from the law and philology as from Aristotle. Moreover, such successful direct fertilization by historical sources occurs relatively rarely, not nearly often enough to explain why we see the history of philosophy as an area of philosophical study on a par, say, with ethics or epistemology.

The history of philosophy sometimes seems almost to be a history of

philosophical mistakes, suggesting that its value may lie in presenting us with a catalogue of errors to avoid. But philosophical mistakes occur too often to need the history of philosophy as a source for study. And, other things being equal, it is more fruitful to hone one's critical abilities on the work of one's contemporaries. This explanation again suggests the history of philosophy should be a mere adjunct to philosophy, rather than an actual part.

There is also an unsettling obliqueness about studying past philosophical works either for the moves they suggest we might make or the errors they hold up to avoid. What counts as a good philosophical argument and what counts as a philosophical mistake are both controversial issues. So whatever aid we get from past works must be transported to fit current needs, and then reevaluated in that context. Other things being equal, it would seem better to avoid having thus to transpose and reevaluate, and just judge errors and arguments on their own, as they arise in contemporary discussion.

Perhaps, however, the importance of the history of philosophy has more to do with the perspective it gives us about issues than with any specific, direct contribution it makes to the solving of contemporary problems. A representative sample of past philosophical thought will encompass a far greater diversity of viewpoint and style of argument than one can encounter in contemporary work. This diversity can be useful in giving an appreciation of how dramatically philosophical positions can diverge, how parochial contemporary thought often is, and what unexamined assumptions may underlie our own work. It can suggest how problems might yield to points of view quite different from anything now in fashion, or that we might try approaching issues in radically different ways.²⁴

This kind of explanation has more air of plausibility than does the appeal to specific contributions historical works might make to current research. But concrete examples of this kind of benefit are not easy to find. Many contemporaries have derived much from studying the work of some particular historical figure—P. F. Strawson from Kant, Stuart Hampshire from Spinoza, Roderick M. Chisholm from Brentano, Zeno Vendler from Descartes. But these are all cases in which a contemporary view meshes especially happily with the work of some past philosopher, rather than cases in which studying the past has broadened our perspective. Nor, in any case, does the usefulness of studying some particular figure explain the value of the history of philosophy generally.

Perhaps, therefore, we somehow profit from the history of philosophy because of the extraordinarily high quality of much past work. The works of the great figures on whom we concentrate are penetrating, systematic,

comprehensive, subtle, and thorough, on a scale probably never today equalled. Reading these authors doubtless produces a better sense than we could otherwise get of what it is for philosophical work to have these qualities, and to have them to such an astoundingly high degree.

But the astonishingly high quality of such historical works occurs in the service of theories nobody would now accept, and in connection with issues and problems that are now formulated in rather different terms, when they are addressed at all. We do not now cast issues about ontology or the mind-body problem, e.g., in terms of conceptions of substance such as those that dominated philosophical thought from Aristotle to Berkeley. One can adjust for these differences to make the insights of past thinkers more useful for our own thinking. But it is unclear that the adjusted results will exhibit the same outstanding qualities as the originals. And if they did, why would we not be better off producing our own original works, with as much quality as we can give them, rather than translations of past thought into current idiom?

Indeed, most of the explanations just surveyed seem more apt as reasons for the study of the history of a field by those in literature, music, and the arts than by those in philosophy. Since a primary aim in humanistic studies is to cultivate an appreciation and understanding of works of literature, music, and art, it makes sense to study the best available even if they do not conform to current taste. These goals make it natural, moreover, to study past works to gain perspective about the possible diversity of humanistic work and about what it is that makes some works good. Finally, the great writers, artists, and composers of the past generally had great technical skill. And even though artistic technique evolves, studying past technique does much in developing one's own.

Studying the history of philosophy can, of course, yield similar benefits. And the sense that these benefits are important for philosophy doubtless helps explain its now traditional classification among the humanities. But these considerations simply underscore the need to explain that sense of importance. When cultivation of taste and understanding of value are paramount, the history of a discipline is indispensable. But these are not the central goals of philosophy. The problem remains of why the study of largely unacceptable theories should be considered crucial to a field whose main aim is to arrive at the truth about certain issues. It is worth noting that this problem arises however one conceives of truth. In particular, the distinction between truth as a relation words bear to extralinguistic reality and truth as warranted assertability, on which Rorty heavily relies (e.g., *PMN*, ch. VI, esp. pp. 261–62, and *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Introduction, sec. 3), is irrelevant here. Whether we aim at corre-

spondence with the facts or warranted assertability, it will be equally unclear why we should study largely unacceptable theories.

It may seem that a problem exists about the importance to philosophy of its history only on a rather narrow conception of the nature of philosophy. If philosophical problems are all technical in character, then the analogy with mathematics and the sciences is apt, and it is doubtful whether the history of philosophy could significantly further philosophical progress. But there are areas of philosophy, such as ethics and aesthetics, whose problems resist precise, technical solutions. Perhaps if we give these fields their due, and avoid thinking of philosophical progress in solely technical terms, the importance to philosophy of its history will no longer seem problematic.

But work in ethics and aesthetics aims at accurate formulations of issues and solutions of problems no less than does research in epistemology or philosophy of language. So the history of philosophy should be no more important for any of these subfields than for any others. The issue is not whether we conceive of the problems in these areas in technical terms, but whether the primary aim of such research is to solve certain problems. If so, it is on the face of things unclear why studying unacceptable solutions proffered by past great philosophers will help. The difficulty arises in all areas of philosophical work, no matter how technical. Indeed, many philosophers who work primarily in philosophy of mathematics or mathematical logic study the histories of those fields in a way that a physicist or mathematician would be unlikely to.

From time to time scientists and mathematicians turn to the history of a particular problem to learn what earlier researchers had to say about it. But this occasional practice reveals little about the importance to philosophy of its history. For one thing, the analogy with the history of mathematics and the sciences only suggests a way the history of a field can function as a useful adjunct to that field, and not as an integral part. Moreover, this is not the way philosophy seems actually to profit from its history. One seldom hears that somebody doing contemporary research on the mind-body problem learned something specific and useful from Descartes or Locke that was not independently available in the contemporary literature. Indeed, it would be striking if contemporaries could learn much that way, given the large, and stubborn issues of interpretation that continue to affect our reading of most major past philosophers.

Lawrence H. Powers has given the analogy to the history of science a novel and ingenious turn. A scientific theory must successfully explain relevant scientific experiments performed in the past. Similarly, Powers urges, a philosophical position must explain why past philosophical arguments on the topic in question seemed convincing to those who advanced

them.²⁵ Scientific experiments, of course, must be replicable; so their having occurred in the past is incidental to the scientist's aims and procedures. But Powers insists that an ahistorical account of past philosophical arguments will not do. A philosophical theory must "explain why these arguments appeared cogent to" past philosophers, and this "will involve us in assessing the dialectical situation prevailing at that time" (11).

When philosophers study the history of philosophy, they do indeed seem largely concerned to explain why past arguments and positions seemed compelling to those in the past who advanced them. But when philosophers pursue their distinctively philosophical interests, why should they care why past philosophers found something convincing? That may well be historically interesting. But the distinctively philosophical question about past arguments and views is whether they are convincing to us. Powers's answer in effect appeals to "a dialectical rule according to which philosophers cannot simply ignore but must try to explain the arguments of their opponents" (8). But it is not clear why this rule should apply to historical figures. Philosophers invariably have opponents enough among their contemporaries without borrowing from the past. And the spirit of that dialectical rule can hardly be satisfied with opponents who cannot answer back. In any case, our problem was to explain the importance to philosophy of its history. We cannot do that unless we can explain why Powers's dialectical rule applies to opponents of the past as well as the present.

Perhaps the most widespread explanation of the importance to philosophy of its history is that we can understand the problems that define contemporary discussion only if we understand its historical background. The problems each generation addresses often derive from the work of the preceding generation. And philosophical issues are frequently put in terms of theories and debates that figure prominently in the philosophical tradition.²⁶ But past philosophical discussions typically differ markedly in style and substance from those of today. And philosophical issues and arguments are highly sensitive to details of exposition. So, while traditional terms and theories may sometimes enhance our understanding of present problems, there is a substantial danger that those traditional discussions will often instead distort those problems.²⁷ We could guard against this undesired result only by having a firm, independent grasp of the character of the problems and issues now addressed. But then illumination from the past would be an idle adornment. In any case, an understanding of past thought could not be necessary to grasp current problems. Since understanding the past unavoidably means putting it in terms now current, we must understand traditional terms and theories by reference to today's thought, rather than the other way around. This need to

construe the past in today's terms has provided one of the main arguments against standard explanations of the importance to philosophy of its history. In the concluding section, this very need to construe others' words will give us the key to why the history of philosophy actually does figure so centrally in philosophy.

IV. UNDERSTANDING PHILOSOPHY AND ITS HISTORY

Understanding somebody else's doctrines or arguments is never an automatic, effortless matter. Grasping another's meaning, whether that person is a contemporary or a predecessor, always involves both word-by-word translation of the other's statements and the charitable attribution to the other of as much correctness as those words will bear. Sometimes we must strike an uneasy balance between these two processes. We adjust readings of individual words if we can get a lot more truth or validity from the resulting sentences and arguments. Such adjustment occurs even when interlocutors share a language. One must sometimes depart from homophonic translation of words to make sense of what somebody is saying. We must sometimes take the other person to use words in ways we would not ourselves if we are to be able to see the other person's statements and inferences as even intelligible, much less correct.²⁸

As noted above, the need to attribute views and inferences charitably is a major factor in the ahistorical character of the history of philosophy written by philosophers. Understanding another requires that we render that person's statements in words we ourselves might use. We can grasp somebody else's doctrines and arguments only if we can to some extent construe them in terms native to our own intellectual lives. Any history of philosophy that aims at such understanding must thus treat historical figures to some degree as contemporaries.

But interpretations of past philosophical texts depend on current philosophical discussion in ways that go beyond the mere need to understand those texts in terms native to current debate. As just noted, we must also balance the result of word-for-word translation against the demands of reasonably charitable attribution of views and arguments. But here problems arise, since what counts as charitable will often itself be a matter of philosophical controversy.

This is easiest to see when our aim is charitable attribution in its strongest form. Charity then means that we try, as often as possible, to construe the other person's arguments as valid and claims as true. But there is often heated controversy in philosophy about what is true, and even about what follows from what. So it will often be controversial

whether a reading of a philosophical text is, in this strong sense, charitable.

Charity, however, may mean only that one can make fair sense of the text in question, and not also that it is philosophically sound. This more modest charity requires not that we render arguments as valid and statements as true, but just that we see reasons for advancing those arguments and views—reasons that it is credible to hold, and that the author in question might actually have held. Something makes sense if, roughly, we understand why somebody would have said it.

This form of charity is plainly the least we can ask for. We may sometimes be unable to achieve it, but we cannot aim for less. But there is even less agreement in philosophy about what counts as a credible reason for something than there is about what is true or valid. So it will often be a matter of considerable philosophical controversy whether a particular of a text is charitable in even this minimal way. We cannot, in general, hope to settle whether something counts as a charitable interpretation without first settling whatever philosophical questions are at issue in the interpretation we are considering.

There is an intimate tie between the need to construe charitably and Davidson's compelling claim that we can make sense of another conceptual scheme only within our own. Davidson often expresses this connection by saying that understanding others implies construing most of their beliefs as true. "Charity is forced upon us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters."²⁹ This is a modified form of strong charity. Construing others as mostly agreeing with us is only slightly weaker than always so construing them as to maximize agreement.³⁰ Davidson's caution concerning how much agreement understanding presupposes may seem to cause difficulties. Agreement "in most matters" is unhelpfully vague, telling us only that we must balance strong charity against other considerations.

Davidson tends to cast his view in terms of agreement on truth values because he seeks to understand meaning and belief by applying to natural languages a Tarski-style theory of truth.³¹ But sometimes he puts his point not in terms of such agreement, but as a "methodological presumption of rationality. . . . We weaken the intelligibility of attributions of thoughts of any kind to the extent that we fail to uncover a consistent pattern of beliefs."³² Once we bracket Davidson's appeal to theories of truth, understanding presupposes rationality rather than actual agreement. And a methodological presumption of rationality conforms closely to the minimal form of charity just described. However we may explicate rationality, understanding others requires us to attribute to them reasonable views

and arguments. Other things being equal, the more reasonable we succeed in making them, the more fully we will understand them.

Examples of how our interpretations hinge on philosophically controversial issues are easy to come by. Jaakko Hintikka's performative account of the *cogito*, e.g., will be persuasive only to one convinced that Hintikka's notion of existential inconsistency does the work he claims for it.³³ This has by no means commanded universal assent. Similarly, one will find plausible Alan Gerwith's and Harry G. Frankfurt's explanation of why Meditation III is not circular in the way Arnauld charged roughly to the degree one finds convincing the reasoning they attribute to Descartes. Gewirth and Frankfurt claim that the argument in Meditation III for the divine guarantee is meant only to show that no challenge to the reliability of reasoning which itself relies on reasoning can be coherent.³⁴ Only if that argument strikes one as having *prima facie* plausibility will that interpretation of Descartes seem compelling. Similarly, one's views about the mind-body problem will undoubtedly influence how credible one finds Thomas Slakey's view that Aristotle was a mind-body physicalist, or W. F. R. Hardie's and Jonathan Barnes's arguments that he instead held a modified form of dualism.³⁵ Again, one's positions on various contemporary issues about modality will very likely affect how one tries to interpret Aristotle on potentiality and actuality, or on the sea battle. Other examples abound, many of which, being less dramatic are less readily noticed.

The foregoing considerations explain why such dramatic diversity exists in how philosophers interpret their predecessors' work. We must exercise minimal charity when we construe a text, and in the case of a philosophical text what counts as charitable hinges in part on substantive issues about which opinion is markedly divided. Such division of opinion unavoidably results in corresponding controversy about the interpretation of texts.

These factors also help us understand an odd phenomenon that is otherwise difficult to explain. There is a striking prevalence of misunderstanding among philosophers who hold opposing views. This can occur even among those whose philosophical acumen is otherwise the greatest, and it occurs in contemporary debate no less than in exchanges such as those between Locke and Leibniz, or Descartes and the authors of the various Objections. Since what counts as a charitable ascription hinges in part on points of philosophical controversy, we are especially prone to misconstrue those with whom we have substantial disagreements. When disagreements are sufficiently stark, the pronouncements of another may actually seem incapable of being construed in a way that is even minimally charitable. Thus the familiar temptation arises to which philosophers sometimes succumb simply to regard as unintelligible remarks of

those with whom they sharply differ, remarks that others often find quite comprehensible.

We often use the doctrines and arguments of the great figures of the past as reference points in putting forth our own position. This is entirely natural. Invoking our shared intellectual heritage is frequently effective for expository purposes. And the issues that divide us from our contemporaries often seem so immediate and so intractable that these past figures may be the only useful common ground available to us.

However natural this expository practice is, it has important presuppositions that are seldom noticed. Using past thinkers as reference points can be useful only if we see those thinkers as sharing with us a common set of terms, views, and interests. Thus invoking past thinkers, however, is just an expository device; our main interest is in issues we must be able to articulate independently of the views of others, past or present. So we must in effect construe the past writers we invoke in terms of those issues. Only thus can this expository practice help convey our views, rather than distort them.

Finally, to be at all useful, this construal of past thinkers in terms of our own interests must remain tacit. There is little expository value in putting our own points in terms of past writings if we then explicitly construe those writings by reference to contemporary discussion that we independently understand. Invoking past views and arguments can be expositoryly useful in addressing issues of current concern only because our construing past thinkers in our terms is typically so effortless, and so often goes unnoticed.

Thus invoking past figures will sometimes mean seeing them as siding with us against our contemporaries in ways that are tendentious and controversial, with respect to the issues we want to discuss. This is to be expected. If current debate divides us so starkly that we must look to past discussions to find shared terms, our interpretations of those discussions will very likely reflect that current divergence of position. Because our construing past thinkers in our terms must remain tacit, disagreements about those thinkers will tend to look like misreadings of readily accessible texts, rather than disagreements about philosophically controversial issues of current concern.

The need to understand past authors in terms of our own thinking does not at all imply that contemporary fashions of thought are superior to those of the past. Indeed, one's own thinking might be recognizably more akin to that of some past era than to any views now current.³⁶ But no matter how much one's views resemble those of some past time, or how much one identifies with discussions then prevalent, one must still understand others ultimately in terms of one's own thinking, even others for

which one has a special affinity. We have access to another's thought only insofar as we can put it in terms we independently understand. And to the extent that we interact with our contemporaries, our thinking will inevitably be cast in terms native to current discussion.³⁷

It might seem that however great the vagaries of charitable attribution may be, they surely could not issue in such a wide range of interpretations found acceptable by different philosophers. Everybody, after all, must operate largely within the constraints set by homophonic translation when we construe those with whom we share a language, or constraints set by established lexicons in other cases. The words we use cannot mean just anything, and the possibility of communicating with our peers presupposes standards embodied in homophony and in standard lexicons.³⁸

Homophony and traditional lexicography map others' words into our own. When communication is unproblematic, these mappings yield strong constraints; we can then count on others using words pretty much as we do. Fluency and the impression of mutual comprehension provide operational ways to tell when this situation prevails. But when substantial issues divide philosophers, ready understanding is frequently impaired, and important terms are often used in discernibly different ways. Here received lexicons, and even homophony, help a lot less than usual. We are then trying to construe people who are using words as we ourselves never would.

It is sometimes said that the historian should present the past objectively, from a neutral, unbiased perspective. And it might seem that construing the words of others in terms of our own thinking impairs such neutral objectivity.³⁹ But such construal is unavoidable; what somebody says is intelligible only if we can represent it in terms we independently grasp. And in any case, such construing need not threaten neutrality or objectivity. The more adequate our own thinking is to the relevant issues, the more unbiased and objective our reports of others' views will be. Absolute objectivity and neutrality in such reports are of course unattainable. But that is true even in the sciences; complete objectivity and neutrality are ideals we can approach, not goals we can reach.

In his important and influential 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas',⁴⁰ Quentin Skinner has penetratingly discussed the question of proper methodology in intellectual history. Skinner takes to task both the view that "the *context* 'of religious, political, and economic factors' . . . determines the meaning of any given text," and the opposing "orthodoxy" that "the autonomy of the *text* itself [is] the sole necessary key to its own meaning" (3, emphasis original). Both these views, he maintains, go wrong "in the assumptions they make about the conditions necessary for the understanding of utterances" (4). "The understanding of

texts," he argues, "presupposes the grasp both of what they were intended to mean, and how this meaning was intended to be taken" (48). Thus "the appropriate methodology [for the history of ideas] is . . . concerned in this way with the recovery of intentions" (49).

Skinner envisages this recovery of intentions as "part of [a] linguistic enterprise" in which we first "delineate the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by . . . the given utterance, and, next, to trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider *linguistic* context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer" (49). But in philosophy, both past and present, misunderstandings among contemporaries are virtually epidemic. Conventional patterns will therefore help little in such a recovery of intentions. And there is little to go on when we "trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider *linguistic* context" except our desire to make the text intelligible. This means simply relying on minimal charity in attributing beliefs and inferences to the author.

The central role of charitable attribution in construing past philosophical writings points the way to a satisfactory and revealing solution to our problem about the importance to philosophy of its history. When we charitably interpret a philosophical text, we must have sufficient command over the philosophical issues an earlier author raises for us to judge what construals would actually be charitable. Some of these issues will by now have become settled. But many will not. And there will be unsolved problems the author did not address explicitly which are intimately tied to those the author did. And there are invariably some of these unsolved problems we must in some way sort out in order to tell what readings of the author's text make reasonable sense. Wrestling with the meaning of philosophical texts means, almost invariably, wrestling with substantive philosophical issues of current concern.

There is thus no conflict between conceiving of philosophy as a problem-solving activity and assigning a central and integral role within the field to the history of philosophy. One cannot do philosophical justice to the history of philosophy without actually doing philosophical work on problems that are the subject of current controversy. When philosophers do such historical work, their style often minimizes the role of that philosophical work. But it is unavoidable in reconstructing what construals of historical texts could possibly make philosophical sense.

The study of past philosophical texts is in a way, therefore, a somewhat oblique way to approach philosophical problems. But this obliqueness is not the kind stigmatized in the foregoing section as unhelpful. It is not that we are trying to solve the problems obliquely, by bringing to bear the insights, techniques, or proposals of past philosophers. Rather, we must

directly come to terms with contemporary issues and problems in the very course of trying to understand past philosophical views. The indirectness affects only the way the problems arise; we must try to solve them in just the way we would if they had arisen independently of the study of any philosophical text.

This oblique approach to philosophical problems can be extremely beneficial. Formulating philosophical problems is notoriously difficult. Their abstractness makes them elusive, and they often seem virtually inseparable from the tangle of issues in which they arise. Trying to make reasonable philosophical sense of an important text provides a useful scaffold from which to work on central problems, problems which ineluctably arise in trying to construe that text. The task of interpretation helps structure the problems one addresses, and may allow them to arise in more manageable ways.

Accordingly, approaching philosophical problems thus indirectly has some of the advantages of critically commenting on the views and arguments of a contemporary. But interpreting past works affords far more flexibility in the problems one discusses, and how one discusses them. In commenting on one's peers, the works one discusses largely defines the problem one can sensibly take up. In philosophical exegesis of past works, by contrast, one will address whatever problems are useful in arriving at an accurate and charitable construal of the work at hand.

These observations help make sense of a number of Collingwood's otherwise difficult pronouncements. The historian's aim, he insisted, is to understand past actions from the agent's point of view. This means understanding the thought processes that issued in those actions.⁴¹ In the special case of studying what somebody wrote, we must "discover what the person who wrote those words meant by them," which "means discovering the thought . . . which he expressed by them" (282–83). Since understanding words and deeds means understanding the thoughts they expressed, "[a]ll history is the history of thought" (215; cp. 305). Hyperbole aside, there is nothing difficult here.

But Collingwood goes on to maintain that "the historian can discern the thoughts he is trying to discover" only "by rethinking them in his own mind" (215; cp. 283, 304). This may seem puzzling. How can one rethink a past thought without already knowing what that thought was? And in any case, how could one find out such a thing? But if our goal is understanding, rethinking is an effective, and indeed an unavoidable procedure. Rethinking means simply trying to think through what would make tolerable sense for somebody in the relevant position—somebody who wrote those words or performed those deeds. This fits well with Collingwood's apparently extravagant remark that "[t]he fact that we can identify

[a philosopher's] problem is proof that he has solved it" (*Autobiography*, p. 70). On the present suggestion, this means just that we can only identify the problem by reference to what the proffered solution would actually solve.⁴² The supposition that the solution works is merely a fairly strong form of charity in construing the text.⁴³

Collingwood insists, moreover, that one could not "discove[r] (for example) 'what Plato thought' without inquiring 'whether it is true'" (*Idea of History*, 300). "What is required, if I am to know Plato's philosophy, is both to re-think it in my own mind and also to think other things in the light of which I can judge it" (305). Again, Collingwood evidently has charitable attribution in mind. We must attribute to Plato, say, views that make the best philosophical sense we can manage of the words he wrote. We must examine interpretive hypotheses to see both how well they fit the text and how much philosophical sense they make. Philosophical criticism is an integral part of philosophical exegesis; interpretation and evaluation proceed hand in hand.⁴⁴

It might seem that much simpler, less arcane explanations are available of the importance to philosophy of its own history, explanations that would circumvent difficult issues about charitable attribution and the like. After all, the subject matter of the history of philosophy is undeniably in part philosophical; studying past views about philosophical problems means studying those problems. And the skills involved in interpreting philosophical writing are, at least, akin, to those involved in actually solving philosophical problems.

But neither explanation is convincing. Interpreting texts and solving philosophical problems are quite diverse activities, which typically appeal to different temperaments, demand different talents and training, and satisfy different interests. Exegesis calls for careful scholarship, solving philosophical problems for abstract, conceptual work. Even when the text deals with philosophical problems, these activities remain quite different. Nor does studying past views about philosophical problems always, or even often, proceed in a way that would engage philosophical interests, as the large number of philosophically sterile histories of philosophy attests. And, in any case, we have no access to what problems a text may have addressed independent of our rendering that text in our own philosophical terms. What arouses lively, keen philosophical interest in studying past views is the challenge of making good philosophical sense of the text at hand. Typically we can meet this challenge only if we address certain problems independently of the views we are studying. Exegesis is not similar to philosophical activity, even when it is about such activity. But because charitable attribution implies a fair amount of philosophical knowledge, successful exegesis requires philosophical activity.

This hypothesis helps explain a number of points noted in the section III. For example, studying the history of philosophy is generally a more fertile source of philosophical ideas than other areas precisely because making philosophical sense of a text forces one to confront pivotal philosophical issues. Such study can give us perspective that is philosophically beneficial because the demands of charitable attribution put yesterday's outmoded theories and problems in the context of today's pending issues. The quality of a past philosopher's work matters more to us than how correct that philosopher's theories and solutions were because we generally profit more from having to confront philosophical problems that arise in trying to understand the work than from the past philosopher's views themselves.

Most important, we can do justice both to the problem-solving character of philosophical activity and to the preoccupation philosophers have with the history of their field. In particular, we can explain why philosophy shares that preoccupation with the characteristically humanistic disciplines. History is central in the humanities because our main goal there is to uncover the significance of specific works. It is useful in philosophy because uncovering the significance of great works provides a fruitful way to work on actual problems.

Without an explanation of the importance of history that preserves philosophy's problem-solving character, there is some appeal to Rorty's contention that philosophy is not a search after truth, but merely a cultural phenomenon on a par with literature and the arts. The present explanation undercuts that appeal. Nor will Rorty's actual historicist arguments carry much weight. If we must understand past philosophers in terms of philosophical issues that occupy us today, the shifts of concern and context that divide us from our predecessors can hardly sustain skepticism about the value of continuing to work on philosophical problems.

Our goal, when we study the philosophical work of a contemporary, is relatively straightforward. We must in the first instance understand that work, but our main interest is to learn from it and evaluate it critically. When we read a past philosophical work, however, understanding is no longer a mere preliminary concern. The problems, context, and theories of the past differ so markedly from our own that understanding normally becomes our main goal in the study of past works.

There is an air of paradox here. The goal of philosophical work is not the understanding of others' views, but to develop and defend the most satisfactory view one can. The foregoing solution is that we understand another's views only when we grasp the issues involved well enough to tell what a charitable interpretation would be of that person's words. This is, in effect, a special case of the general point that understanding implies

knowing. We understand something, whether a substantive issue or the views of another, only when we know our way reasonably well around the topic under consideration.⁴⁵

NOTES

1. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979 [henceforth *PMN*; unless otherwise indicated, references to Rorty are to this work]; *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). Of particular interest also are 'Realism and Reference', *The Monist*, LIX, 3 (July 1976): 321-340 and 'The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres', in *Philosophy in History*, edited by Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 49-75. Virtually all the essays in this collection are of interest for the present topic.

2. See 'The Historiography of Philosophy', sec. III: "Doxography."

3. Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), 155-57, and *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), xiii-xiv. Russell's conviction that philosophical problems are perennial is vividly expressed by his remarkable contention in *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1900) that the philosophies of the past belong to one or other of a few great types—types which in our own day are perpetually recurring—[and] we may learn, from examining the greatest representative of any type, what the grounds are for such a philosophy (xii).

Thus a purely philosophical attitude towards previous philosophers . . . seek[s] simply to discover [without regard to dates or influences] what are the great types of possible philosophies (xi-xii).

4. This eliminativism is not new with Rorty. As Jonathan Rée observes, the eighteenth-century philosophes largely adopted the attitude Rorty recommends toward philosophical issues. "They took the apparent separateness of philosophy and ordinary ideas as reasons for denigrating or ridiculing philosophy." Thus

Adam Smith drew the conclusion that systems of philosophy were matters of taste and that people could not 'reasonably be much interested about them'; and in general the philosophes decided that traditional philosophy ought to be abandoned ("Philosophy and the History of Philosophy," in Jonathan Rée, Michael Ayers, and Adam Westoby, *Philosophy and its Past* [Hassocks: The Harvester Press, 1978], p. 7).

Ian Hacking seeks to undercut the problem-solving paradigm in a nonrevolutionary way, by suggesting that it is a parochial view that originated in the early twentieth century ('Five Parables', in *Philosophy in History*: 103-124, p. 110). But writings from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, Hume, and Kant seem to provide an abundance of manifest counterexamples to this claim.

5. *Experience and Nature*, 2nd edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1929), 30.

6. It is important to distinguish between seeing something as belonging to our history and seeing it in the context of historical developments and changes. Bringing historical perspective or context to bear can enhance our understanding

of things, without at all suggesting any lack of live, current concern in the issues in question. Historical discussion can even revive interest in some topic. But when an issue still excites current interest, its history is thus far incomplete. So when we describe an issue solely in historical terms, and solely as a part of our past, we describe it as devoid of current concern.

7. For a different view about Descartes's terminological innovations and its consequences see Gareth B. Matthews, 'Consciousness and Life', *Philosophy* 52, 199 (January 1977): 26.

8. Nonetheless, it is striking that Descartes's conception of thought actually suggests a mathematical model: we know the mind better than the body because, like mathematical objects, mental states are transparent to intellectual scrutiny.

9. Rorty's discussion of knowledge and language in Part Two of *PMN* leads him to conclude that we should stop seeing science as the sole source of objective truth about things (see pp. 372-78). Despite his questioning the authoritative status of science, this line of reasoning concurs with the standard explanation just sketched in linking the central problems of modern philosophy to the claims of modern science to provide a standard of objectivity.

10. See, e.g., Eccles in Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles, *The Self and its Brain* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977). Popper and Eccles give a useful sample of quotations to this effect from Wilder Penfield, Erwin Schrödinger, Charles Sherrington, and Eugene P. Wigner.

11. On these points see my 'Keeping Matter in Mind', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* V (1980), 295-322.

12. See Collingwood's striking contention that "we only know what the problem was [that somebody addressed] by arguing back from the solution". *An Autobiography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 70.

13. Insofar as a problem provides the conceptual character of an issue and a solution is a theory, Collingwood seems to recognize this equivalence. Thus he stresses that reasoning from solution to problem cannot be done apart from reasoning from problem to solution, and that the two are interdependent. As observed in note 12, we can determine what problem somebody meant to address only by reference to the solution. But also, "you cannot find out what a man means by simply studying his spoken or written statements. . . . [Y]ou must also know what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer" (p. 31; cp. pp. 55 and 71).

14. 'Carnap and Logical Truth', in *Way of Paradox and Other Essays*, revised and enlarged edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975): 107-133, p. 109.

15. Though see Tyler Burge's 'Individualism and the Mental', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* IV (1979): 73-121 for a penetrating and compelling challenge to the idea that the mental has such special status.

16. On these points, see my 'Keeping Matter in Mind'.

17. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second Edition, Enlarged (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), and *The Essential Tension* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977).

18. See Davidson's 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', reprinted in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 183-198. See also, in that collection, Davidson's 'Radical Interpretation', 'Thought and Talk', and 'Belief and the Basis of Meaning'. Cp. Rée's similar argument:

The idea that if one system of thought breaks with another there cannot be any comparison between them is self-defeating. A discontinuity only exists when one system differs from or conflicts with another, and this presupposes that they can be compared ('Philosophy and the History of Philosophy', p. 15; cp. p. 30).

Davidson's claim does not, of course, apply to the intrapersonal case. Each of us presumably thinks about things in many ways that resist translation into the others. For the purposes of Davidson's point, the different ways one person thinks about things are all parts of a single conceptual scheme. It is only another's way of thinking that I must somehow be able to translate into my own for it to be intelligible to me.

19. Except, perhaps, insofar as those we seek to understand may turn out to lack some of our conceptual resources. Difficulties about alternative conceptual schemes therefore do not prevent us from Rorty's account of the Antipodeans as diverging from us conceptually, since, if he is right that they lack a concept of mind, they will have weaker conceptual resources than ours.

20. E.g., 122: "It would better at this point to abandon argument and fall back on sarcasm."

21. *The Structure of Appearance*, second edition (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), xix.

22. The analogy of philosophy with the sciences, in respect of their dominating concern for getting at the way things are, is thus independent of any view, such as that of the logical empiricists or the seventeenth-century rationalists, which models philosophical procedures on that of the sciences.

23. In addition to items specifically cited, recent discussions of this problem occur among the contributions to a special issue of *Synthese* (67, 1 [April 1986]), entitled *The Role of History in and for Philosophy*; a special issue of *The Monist* (53, 4 [October 1969]), entitled *Philosophy and the History of Philosophy* (see especially Lewis White Beck's introduction and bibliography); and *Philosophy, its History and Historiography*, edited by A. J. Holland (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1985), Part I: 'Conceptions of Philosophy's History.' I have also greatly benefited on these and related topics from Michael Frede, 'The Historiography of Philosophy', manuscript.

24. Edwin Curley has forcefully advanced an explanation along these lines in 'Dialogues with the Dead', *Synthese* 67, 1 (April 1986: 33-49).

25. 'On Philosophy and its History', *Philosophical Studies* 50, 1 (July 1986): 1-38, pp. 9-11.

26. See, e.g., Lesley Cohen, "Doing Philosophy is Doing its History," *Synthese* 67, 1 (April 1986): 51-55.

27. It is arguable that Rorty's historical account has just such a distorting effect on contemporary issues and problems.

28. This difficulty is a matter of how to construe the words of another in respect of the propositional content those words express. So it persists even if we concentrate on that content, in abstraction from the complete mental context in which the other person's that content was held.

29. 'On the Very Idea', p. 197. See also, e.g., 'Radical Interpretation':

If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything (137).

and 'Thought and Talk':

A theory of interpretation cannot be correct that makes a man assent to very many false sentences: it must generally be the case that a sentence is true when a speaker holds it to be (169).

30. See, e.g., 'Thought and Talk', p. 169 for some remarks on when other factors may lead us to suspend such charity. On the general need for charity, see Quine, 'Carnap and Logical Truth', and *Word and Object* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1960), sec. 13; on some limits to such charity, see *Philosophy of Logic* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), chapter 6.

31. See 'Radical Interpretation', 'Belief and the Basis of Meaning', and especially essays 2 through 5 in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*.

32. 'Thought and Talk', p. 159. See also, e.g., 'Belief and the Basis of Meaning':

Making sense of the utterances and behaviour of others, even their most aberrant behaviour, requires us to find a great deal of reason and truth in them. To see too much unreason on the part of others is simply to undermine our ability to see what it is they are so unreasonable about (153).

33. 'Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?', *The Philosophical Review*, LXXI, 1 (January 1962): 3-32; 'Cogito, Ergo Sum as an Inference and a Performance', *The Philosophical Review*, LXXII, 4 (October 1963): 487-496.

34. Gewirth, 'The Cartesian Circle', *The Philosophical Review*, L, 4 (July 1941): 368-395 and 'The Cartesian Circle Reconsidered', *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXVII, 19 (October 8, 1970): 668-685; Frankfurt, 'Descartes' Validation of Reason', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, II, 2 (April 1965): 149-156.

35. Slakey, 'Aristotle on Sense Perception', *The Philosophical Review*, LXX, 4 (October 1961): 470-484; Hardie, 'Concepts of Consciousness in Aristotle', *Mind*, LXXXV, 3 (July 1976): 388-411 and *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980): 83-93; and Barnes, 'Aristotle's Concept of Mind', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, LXXII (1971/2): 101-114.

36. On this possibility, see especially Frede, 'The Historiography of Philosophy', p. 37 and sec. 7, and 'The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent', in *Philosophy in History*, edited by Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 255-278, reprinted in Frede's *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 201-222, pp. 221-22.

37. Leo Strauss is therefore mistaken to urge that, in order to remain open to the possibility "that the thought of the past is superior to the thought of the present day," we must "abandon the attempt to understand the past from the point of view of the present" ('On Collingwood's Philosophy of History', *The Review of Metaphysics* V, 4 [June 1952]: 559-586, p. 576).

38. On Quine's theses of indeterminacy of translation and inscrutability of reference, equally good translations can differ about truth values of the same sentences and extensions of the same predicates (*Word and Object*, chapter 2, and *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1969], chapters 1 and 2). But if such variations do occur, they would be irrelevant to the present argument, since by hypothesis they are empirically undetectable.

39. Powers believes this threat arises specifically because, to explain why a past philosopher advanced an argument we see as invalid, we must generally appeal to some equivocation that that philosopher was unaware of. But one cannot resolve, or even take note of such equivocation without adopting a philosophical position, since, as Powers rightly observes, "in philosophy, questions about ambi-

guity are very controversial. One philosopher's distinctions are another's pseudodistinctions" ('On Philosophy and its History', 31).

Powers argues, however, that neutrality can be rescued. Successful communication does not demand disclosure of these equivocations, much less their resolution (28-35); so a requirement of "absolute clarity . . . [is] unreasonable" (28). This is implausible. If I report a statement without noting its ambiguity, my report is correspondingly ambiguous. Moreover, fallacies of equivocation are hardly the main occasion for interpreting the words of others. An argument may strike us as invalid not because it equivocates, but because it uses terms differently from the way we do. Misunderstandings among contemporaries and variant readings of past writings alike testify to the general need for interpreting others' words.

40. *History and Theory* VIII (1969): 3-53; see also Skinner's numerous related articles, usefully cited in his *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: The Renaissance* (2 vols.), vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 285-86.

41. *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), e.g., pp. 214 and 283).

42. As quoted in note 12: "we only know what the problem was by arguing back from the solution" (*Autobiography*, p. 70).

43. Skinner therefore seems mistaken in arguing that it is simply a conceptual confusion that leads Collingwood to advance this claim ('Meaning and Understanding', p. 51).

44. Thus, "the distinction between the 'historical' question 'what was So-and-so's theory on such and such a matter?' and the 'philosophical' question 'was he right?'" is "fallacious" (*Autobiography*, p. 68). Similar claims are advanced by Ree:

The attempt to exclude history from philosophy, and philosophy from history, is not so much impractical as theoretically impossible. Ascribing a belief to someone involves making some sense of it by articulating it into one's own language and concepts" ('Philosophy and the History of Philosophy,' p. 30; cp. Ree's Davidsonian remark, quoted in note 18)

and by John Dunn:

[T]he connection between an adequate philosophical account of the notions held by an individual in the past and an adequate historical account of these notions is an intimate one; both historical specificity and philosophical delicacy are more likely to be attained if they are pursued together . . ." ('The Identity of the History of Ideas', *Philosophy* XLIII, 164 [April 1968]: 85-103, p. 86)

See also Skinner's acknowledgement of general indebtedness on these matters to Collingwood (*Foundations*, vol. I, x, note 2).

45. I am grateful to Eileen Abrahams, and especially to Michael Frede for useful and probing comments on an earlier version of this paper.

THE INSTITUTION OF PHILOSOPHY

A DISCIPLINE IN CRISIS?

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