

## 6. Philosophy and Its Teaching

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### 1. The Humanities and the Sciences

A striking difference between those fields we classify as humanities and those we regard as sciences is the attitude within each field toward its history. Learning about literature, music, or the visual arts requires becoming knowledgeable about a significant amount of the history of those areas. And education in these fields, at whatever level, invariably involves some study of great accomplishments in the past.

By contrast, scientific work and standard scientific textbooks make little reference to the history of the science in question, and such reference is typically relegated to the appreciative mention in passing of important empirical discoveries or theoretical innovations. And professional training in the sciences, both graduate and undergraduate, involves no serious examination of the achievements or methodology of past scientific work, no matter how impressive and influential those achievements may have been.

Progress dominates thinking in the sciences, and that emphasis may seem to explain such casual and occasionally condescending reference to the history of the sciences. But progress occurs in the humanities as well; even if some of the greatest artistic accomplishments are well in the past, there is remarkable innovation in style, technique, and methodology in the various arts. Some of the most monumental accomplishments in the sciences, moreover, are historical; nobody is likely to surpass the quality and importance of Newton's achievements, and few will ever equal those of Einstein. So it is unlikely that attitudes towards progress or past accomplishments can explain the divergent attitudes that fields in the sciences and humanities exhibit towards their own history.

We can better understand this contrast by appeal to a characteristic feature of the arts. Nobody today writes in the manner of Milton, Racine, or Shakespeare, or composes in the manner of Bach or Beethoven, or paints in the style of Vermeer, Renoir, or Da Vinci. Even Picasso's early, somewhat ostentatious paintings in the styles of various past masters were more to show his prodigious abilities than they were original artistic endeavors. Still, past artistic achieve-

ments often influence current work in ways that critics and professors delight in tracing. And the past even influences new styles that purport to break with the past, since those breakaway styles are developed in reaction to influential work of predecessors. A full appreciation of work in the arts often, if not invariably, requires understanding previous work.

Nothing like this is true in the sciences. Current work in the sciences always builds on past theoretical and experimental accomplishments. Contemporary scientific work would be unthinkable without the theoretical breakthroughs and empirical findings of Newton, Faraday, Poincaré, Lavoisier, and Einstein. Still, such work is typically presented as part of our current body of scientific knowledge; the way in which that knowledge builds on past accomplishments is at best relegated to footnotes.

There are exceptions; scientists do sometimes appeal directly to the thinking of Darwin and of Freud. But that is arguably because there is still considerable scientific controversy in the relevant scientific fields, which are not yet operating on a firm, widely accepted scientific foundation. The theoretical innovations of Darwin and Freud therefore remain relevant to contemporary scientific debate.

This explanation of the contrast between the sciences and humanities as regards the study of their histories reflects a recognized difference between those two groups of disciplines. Progress in the sciences makes significant consideration of past work relatively unnecessary. From the point of view of ongoing scientific investigation, any achievement worth studying is simply incorporated into the current statement of our scientific knowledge. So far as scientific knowledge is concerned, the current state of things is enough.

The kind of progress that occurs in the arts, however, does not result in any similar irrelevance of past accomplishments. Whatever innovations occur in style, technique, or methodology, or in our thinking about the humanistic disciplines themselves, the great achievements of the past continue to demand study on their own right. Past work is not simply assimilated into the current state of knowledge, as in the sciences. We learn from past works in ways that we could not learn from any contemporary accomplishments.

This contrast is largely due to differences of goal. In the sciences, we aim to get at the truth about reality, and to explain those truths by constructing theories that cover a wide range of phenomena and enable the prediction of new phenomena. Any empirical discoveries and theoretical innovation worth studying are accordingly incorporated into the current state of scientific knowledge.

The goal in the arts is different. The aim there is to produce works of beauty and sublimity, works that capture our thoughts about and outlooks on the human condition and that we find moving, inspiring, and affecting. Such works may well express truths we find difficult to capture in scientific terms, but those are not the truths we seek in the sciences. These truths are typically either those of common sense or generalizations from common sense; they are not subjected to empirical test and we do not seek to subsume them in theoretical structures. Moreover, artists and critics typically find different truths expressed in particular

works of art, and we may well not follow a particular artist's word about the significance of that artist's works. So there is no way to incorporate the truths we find expressed in works of art within an articulable body of current knowledge. The need of artists and critics to study past works is inescapable.

Teaching in the sciences and humanities, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, follows suit. To get a grounding in the humanities, students must be acquainted in some serious way with a good sample of the great works of the past. But students in the sciences have no corresponding need to know anything about the history of their field, and seldom know more than standard passing references to great breakthroughs. The history of science figures in scientific teaching only as the respectful tipping of our collective hat to great past achievements, not as anything essential to an understanding of the relevant field.

## 2. Philosophy and Its History

It is instructive to compare practices in philosophy and its teaching with those in the sciences and arts. Philosophy is today typically classified among the humanities, though in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries it was seen as continuous not with the arts, but with the sciences. And both work and training in philosophy today plainly follow the pattern described above for the arts and other humanities. A substantial part of any undergraduate philosophy curriculum consists of the study of historical figures, sometimes without any explicit mention of relevant contemporary work. Even anthologies that stress current work often also include historical work, as though to build a bridge from past to present. And work on contemporary issues often alludes to historical work, sometimes even when the issues under consideration were not pursued or even recognized before the current day.

This emphasis on the history of philosophy seldom occasions notice or comment, since serious attention to historical work is characteristic of the humanities, and philosophy is typically seen as among the humanities. But the early modern view of philosophy as continuous with the sciences prompts the question whether its classification with the humanities reflects anything essential about philosophy, as against simply being a convenience for librarians and university administrations.

There is a familiar picture of philosophy on which it fits comfortably within the humanities, and on which we would expect the emphasis on history. Philosophical work is sometimes seen not as an investigation of the truth about things, but as the development and elaboration of various perspectives on reality. Philosophy presents us with ways of seeing how things fit together and the place that individuals and humanity in general occupy in the overall scheme of things.

What we gain from philosophy, on this picture, is not much like what the sciences have to give us. Rather, the understanding philosophy offers is something like that which we get from plays, novels, and poetry. On this way of see-

ing philosophy, Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Dostoyevsky are philosophers along with Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Dewey, and we learn from them all much the same kind of thing. It is largely a matter of literary taste which of these authors we prefer and with which we connect most naturally, both intellectually and otherwise. This view of philosophy underwrites its classification among the humanities. This picture also underlies and may seem to warrant the persistent and pervasive sense, in popular culture as well as much literary work, that philosophy in the Anglo-American tradition is dry, uninteresting, and sterile.

The emphasis on the history of philosophy is also understandable on this picture. The history of philosophy provides an impressive range of perspectives on reality and the place of humanity. These perspectives sometimes complement and reinforce each other, though they often clash, presenting mutually incompatible views. We learn much from examining and comparing these perspectives, both when they fit together and when they are mutually incompatible. On this picture, whatever progress occurs in philosophy would never outweigh the benefits of studying the great philosophical systems of the past. We learn from those works in something like the way we learn from the great past creations in music, art, and literature.

But this picture of philosophy, though it justifies its classification as a humanity and explains its emphasis on its own history, leaves out a lot that has been considered central to philosophy throughout that history. The attitude of the great philosophers that constructed these alternative, often incompatible systems has seldom if ever been that of great literary figures whose work offers alternative perspectives. Rather, their attitude is that of scientific theorists who develop alternative theories. They assume that at most one of the philosophical systems gets things right, and they advance arguments in favor of their own. They see themselves as trying to set philosophy onto the "secure path of a science," as Kant famously put it (B Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bvii).

Indeed, the language of perspectives is typically foreign to the writing of philosophers. Hobbes and Descartes did not see themselves in the third set of *Objections and Replies to the Meditations* as differing about perspectives on reality, but about the truth on various issues. Nor is some quasi-literary perspective in question when Aristotle takes his predecessors to task for concentrating on only one of the four causes, or when Kant talks about the failures of rationalism and empiricism. Similarly throughout the history of philosophy; the great figures we study saw themselves as trying to get at the truth about things, much as scientists see themselves as doing.

Philosophical work often purports to employ different methods from those used in the sciences to arrive at the truth. And the issues and questions about which they seek the truth typically differ as well. But subject matter and method aside, the goals are much the same. Whether the issues pertain to metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, or other branches of philosophy, philosophical writing seeks correct answers to particular questions.

Contemporary work in philosophy is no different in this respect. The questions and issues have changed somewhat in various ways, and there are new

ways of dividing philosophy into subspecialties. But now as in the past, philosophical work aims at establishing the truth about particular matters.

This poses a problem for understanding the nature of philosophy, and a consequent problem about how best to teach it. If the goal of philosophy is to establish truths about specific issues, what matters is the truths it manages to establish. And then it should simply catalog and organize those truths, revising them as needed, but presenting at every stage the body of knowledge that philosophy has so far come up with. It should, in short, operate present as the sciences do. But in this case, it will be no more obvious in philosophy than in the sciences what benefit is to be derived from studying the history of the field.

This problem plainly carries over to the teaching of philosophy. As noted at the outset, a large portion of both undergraduate and graduate curriculums is typically devoted to the history of philosophy. But it's unclear why that should be if philosophical work aims primarily at the establishment of truths about particular issues. It might be useful for undergraduates who don't intend to pursue further work in philosophy to know something of its history. But that cannot by itself explain the prominence within the philosophy curriculum of courses on its history.

### 3. Why Study the History of Philosophy?

There is a variety of explanations put forth for this prominence. But it is arguable that none of the standard explanations is satisfactory.

One explanation often offered cites the way in which contemporary work in philosophy is sometimes inspired by the work of a particular historical figure. The early work of Stuart Hampshire owes much to his study of Spinoza, and J. L. Austin's extensive knowledge of Aristotle plainly figures throughout his writing. But such cases are relatively unusual; the most telling influences in contemporary philosophical work are typically late nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers. Contemporary work does, as mentioned earlier, sometimes refer to historical figures, but such reference is typically made largely in passing, and contributes little if anything to the argument or position being developed.

Another explanation sometimes advanced is that students cannot come to grasp contemporary philosophical issues without knowing the historical antecedents that led to those issues. This is highly implausible. Many students today display an impressive command of issues at the center of all areas of contemporary work in philosophy, and yet have no significant knowledge of the history of philosophy.

This is not surprising, given that relatively few contemporary issues occur in historical discussions in the same way. Contemporary issues are almost always transposed somewhat relative to their historical cognates, and occur now in theoretical contexts that would have been unrecognizable in earlier periods. So appeal to history antecedents in learning about contemporary issues may fail to help students grasp the exact nature of those issues as they figure in the contem-



porary literature, and may even invite some confusion about them. The appeal to historical antecedents of contemporary discussions frequently necessitates compensatory theoretical adjustments, so that historical context does not skew students' understandings of contemporary work.

Another explanation sometimes offered for the emphasis on the history of philosophy applies mainly to the undergraduate curriculum. It is said that it's easier to read and understand the great historical figures than to delve straight into contemporary journal articles, which are often technical and less accessible than classical philosophical writing. The great works of the past accordingly are said to provide a convenient ramp up which the student can progress, eventually getting to contemporary work.

Many great philosophers were also gifted literary figures, and reading them may in that way be far more inviting than reading any contemporary work. And many of the great philosophical works are landmarks in our cultural heritage; it is arguable that every college curriculum should include Plato's *Republic*, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, parts of Descartes's *Meditations* or *Discourse of Method*, and perhaps of one of Hume's *Inquiries*.

But the argument for having these and similar philosophical works in any undergraduate curriculum is not because they facilitate an understanding of the contemporary literature in philosophy, but because of their cultural importance generally. And putting literary and cultural value to one side, the strictly philosophical content of contemporary work is seldom as difficult to understand as even the most widely used classical texts. The texts just mentioned continue to occasion extensive debate about their meaning and their major claims and arguments. There is little in the contemporary literature that would sustain such debate, and little that requires it. In studying the great classical works, students often end up with little more than a cartoon picture of arguments that are pivotal to those works; consider standard treatments of Descartes's *Third Meditation*, or Plato's theory of forms. The current literature in philosophy may be dry, technical, and uninviting in a literary way, but it is seldom nearly so hard to understand.

Indeed, so far as the distinctively philosophical issues are concerned, there is much contemporary work that addresses these issues in relatively self-contained and accessible ways. These are often successfully used to stimulate undergraduates' interest in these issues, and to prepare them for more demanding contemporary work. Focusing solely on effectiveness in getting undergraduates to understand contemporary work in philosophy, and bracketing the acknowledged cultural importance of the great classical figures, it may well be less fruitful to have students read them than to read select contemporary work.

There are other standard explanations for the emphasis on the great classical works in the philosophy curriculum. But it is arguable that they are unconvincing in explaining the substantial place of historical teaching in the philosophy curriculum. Indeed, the failures of the explanations just surveyed suggest considerations that undermine other standard explanations.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. The Historicist Explanation

There is, however, a particular response to this problem that has recently come to be widely discussed and is worth independent consideration. On this view, the standard attitude philosophers, both classical and contemporary, have held toward their own work is simply misguided. Despite their pronouncements, the goal of philosophy is not to establish truths about various issues, but rather to develop and articulate a perspective on the nature of reality and the place of individuals and humanity generally in the overall order of things. The popular picture of philosophy described in the preceding section is, on this account, correct, despite the somewhat scientific pretensions of philosophy itself.

On this view, then, the goal of studying the history of philosophy and training students in it is not to better understand philosophical progress. We should not think of that history as the development of arguments for and against positions about perennial problems articulated by earlier thinkers. Rather, we should see the history of philosophy as offering a virtual conversation that the great figures have among themselves, a conversation whose twists and turns can have a general edifying effect. To study the history of philosophy is to eavesdrop on and perhaps add our own commentary to that conversation. This, in broad strokes, is the view of philosophy and its history championed by Richard Rorty,<sup>2</sup> as well as in much post-modern hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup>

Such a picture has become influential in the view of philosophy held in many academic literature departments. But it has not taken hold in most philosophical work, largely because it fails to do justice to actual philosophical practice, historical or contemporary. Still, it sometimes happens that intellectual work can misrepresent its own significance, and that may be the case with philosophy. Perhaps practitioners of philosophy are, as Rorty argues, in the grip of an inaccurate picture of their own discipline, a picture inherited from an earlier, more naive age. So we need carefully to assess the merits of this revisionist view of philosophical work.

A useful way to evaluate Rorty's historicist attitude toward philosophy is to examine the implications it has for a particular philosophical issue. And it's convenient to do this by considering Rorty's own example of such implications in the case of the mind-body problem. Mind-body materialists such as J. J. C. Smart and D. M. Armstrong had argued in the 1950s and 1960s that we can accommodate qualitative mental states within a materialist framework only if descriptions of such states are topic neutral as regards being physical or mental.<sup>4</sup> Only then, they held, will such qualitative states be physicalistically respectable.

Rorty concurred, arguing that the very concept of the mental precludes anything that is mental from being physical. So mind-body materialism is defensible only in an eliminativist version; we can sustain mind-body materialism only by arguing that there is nothing that is properly classified as mental. And such eliminativism is itself defensible, he argued, because we can describe, explain, and

predict everything we now describe, explain, and predict without any using any mental vocabulary at all.<sup>5</sup>

But this eliminativist resolution of the mind-body problem points, Rorty urged, toward a historicist understanding of philosophical problems themselves, and hence of philosophy. If we no longer describe anything whatever as mental, and indeed dispense with the very category of the mental, we eliminate not only mental descriptions, but the mind-body problem itself. And that, Rorty maintained, is all to the good. Debate for several centuries now about the mind-body problem has arguably produced no useful breakthroughs or progress; dualists and materialists both still thrive in the philosophical literature, and remain as unaffected as ever by the arguments of the other side. This suggests, Rorty argues, that the very issue itself is a false problem, admitting of no convincing solution. And it thereby helps sustain an eliminativist resolution to that apparent problem. The sense that the mind-body problem involves some serious issue is illusory, the result of the needless use of a mentalistic vocabulary loaded with anti-materialist implications. Teaching students that there is a substantive issue here misleads them and distorts their understanding of the relevant literature.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and subsequent writings, Rorty forcefully and eloquently argued that this is true of most of the issues that have dominated philosophical discussion in the Western tradition. We should, he urges, adopt a historicist picture of the questions that have defined philosophical discussion, questions that have continued for centuries to resist straightforward, substantive answers. But though philosophical discussion and debate seldom if ever yield decisive answers, they can often on the historicist picture be edifying. We should study and teach such discussion and debate as a virtual conversation about some of the perspectives available for seeing how our knowledge, practices, and preferences fit together. We should see the so-called problems of philosophy as conundra that arise in developing these perspectives, not as problems that demand and can yield to decisive solutions. They are creatures of particular cultural developments, and have no standing independent of those cultural occurrences.

But the argument for this historicist picture is flawed. Consider again Rorty's case study of the mind-body problem. A naturalist materialism requires jettisoning mental vocabulary, according to Rorty, because that very vocabulary harbors anti-materialist implications. This view of our mental vocabulary is itself controversial, and without it there is no reason to adopt an eliminativist view. But even if Rorty is right about our mental vocabulary, a mind-body materialism would not require jettisoning that vocabulary; we could instead just strip that vocabulary of its anti-materialist implications. As Rorty has forcefully argued, there is no firm line between the meaning of our terms and the theories we take to govern the application of those terms.<sup>6</sup> So we can construe any anti-materialist implications not as part of the meaning of mental descriptions, but rather as an added theory about the nature of the mental. We can then retain our mental vocabulary and consider the claims of materialist and dualist theories on their merits and adjudicate between them.

Rorty would urge that we can understand what made issues about mind-body materialism seem problematic to generations of philosophers only if we see anti-materialist implications as literally built into the meaning of our mental vocabulary. And it is only in those terms that we can construe mind-body materialism as involving genuine intellectual problems. But this argument is unconvincing. For one thing, if anti-materialist implications were built into our mental vocabulary, dualism would automatically win. And if dualism's winning were a conceptual matter, mind-body materialism would be conceptually inconsistent, and it would be hard to see how the debate between dualism and materialism could ever have seemed to be problematic. People do sometimes get entangled in conceptual contradictions. But on Rorty's view the conceptual inconsistency is relatively straightforward, and it's implausible that this would have lasted for centuries. Rorty's picture cannot after all do justice to the apparent problematic character of that debate.

Rorty's idea is that an issue will seem problematic in a distinctively philosophical way only if it is stubbornly persistent and seems to resist straightforward resolution. But whether something seems problematic is relative to whether we think we have a resolution. Once a widely accepted resolution is at hand, the problematic air that had earlier surrounded an issue recedes, and may well disappear altogether. Its problematic character comes to have only historical significance, and reconstruction of its having appeared to be a genuine problem will inevitably seem strained. As Nelson Goodman had noted, because the goal "in philosophy [is] to make the obscure obvious . . . the reward of success is banality. An answer, once found, is obvious."<sup>7</sup> To argue that we must construe philosophical issues in terms of what has made them seem problematic is to deny any possibility of resolution.

## 5. Scaffolds and Connections

Rorty's historicism offers both an explanation and a justification for the prominent place that the history of philosophy occupies within the standard curriculum. If philosophy is best seen as a virtual conversation among the great figures, possibly along with a contemporary commentary on that conversation, the history of philosophy must be as central to the teaching of philosophy as it is in any of the humanities, and in much the same way.

But this historicist picture fails to do justice not only to the way philosophers operate and see their own work, but also to the substantive disputes that drive that work. Historicism about philosophical problems generally, like historicism about particular issues such as the mind-body problem, sees those problems as not being genuine questions that admit of serious answers. But that way of construing these quandaries itself rests on a substantive, controversial position about the nature of these problems. On that position, philosophical quandaries arise not from clashes among competing theories, but from the adoption of optional vocabularies that embody problematic assumptions. But without an



argument that these assumptions are essential to the relevant vocabulary, rather than being added by the choice of theory, such historicism begs the question against the standard view of philosophical issues, on which these issues pose genuine questions that have definite answers. So we cannot rely on the historicist picture to explain the emphasis by philosophy on its history.

The problem, to recapitulate, is that philosophy, like the sciences, aims at getting the truth about various issues. So the history of philosophy should represent progress towards that goal, and we should be able then simply to dispense with the history of that progress. We should be able to study and teach the things that philosophy has so far gotten right, along with the catalog of pressing outstanding problems. If the history of philosophy is useful at all, it cannot be in the way it characteristically is in the arts and other humanities, in which the dominant goal is not simply to get at the truth about things.

We can, however, understand how the history of philosophy is useful in philosophical education without thereby treating philosophy like one of the arts. And this way of understanding the usefulness of the history of philosophy actually underwrites an particular analogy between philosophy and the other humanities.

In discussing methodology in philosophical work early in *Experience and Nature*, John Dewey writes of "those astounding differences of philosophic belief that startle the beginner and that become the plaything of the expert."<sup>8</sup> Every student of philosophy is familiar with the striking phenomenon Dewey is referring to, though it is equally striking that this phenomenon is seldom explicitly mentioned. The history of philosophy is a great collection of systematically developed views, which seem not only incompatible each with the others, but often incommensurate as well.

The arguments that drive each of the great systems also suggest apparent refutations of the others. So it seems one can simply pick and choose among them to suit one's own theoretical disposition and proclivities. Historical development accordingly seems altogether irrelevant in comparing and evaluating these theories. One could, for example, present the synthetic *a priori* of Kant's critical philosophy as undermining Hume's claim that relations of ideas and matters of fact exhaust the kinds of judgments there can be. But one could equally go in the opposite direction, arguing that Hume's dichotomy refutes Kant's notion of synthetic *a priori* judgments. No wonder progress is rare in philosophy, and seldom if ever occurs in connection with system building. And no wonder Dewey saw the resulting "differences of philosophic belief [as] the plaything of the expert."

It is these same apparently incommensurable differences among philosophical systems that Hume evidently had in mind in writing of

the justest and most plausible objection against a considerable part of metaphysics, that they are not properly a science; but arise either from the fruitless efforts of human vanity, which would penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding, or from the craft of popular superstitions, which, be-

ing unable to defend themselves on fair ground, raise these entangling brambles to cover and protect their weakness.<sup>9</sup>

It is hard not to have some sympathy with Hume's complaint. In no other respectable area of intellectual inquiry is there so much theoretical divergence about substantive questions over so long a period of time.

Dewey understood the "astounding" differences in systematic philosophical conviction in characteristically pragmatic terms, urging that such differences result from some theoretical "[c]hoice that is disguised or denied." And he argued that the proper resolution to these striking conflicts in philosophical conviction was to be explicit about every pivotal theoretical choice, treating each choice as a theoretical "experiment to be tried on its merits and tested by its results" (30/35). If we think of Dewey's recommendation in terms of our testing each philosophical system by its theoretical payoff in explaining and describing things, that is doubtless a sensible strategy. We should isolate and expose hidden assumptions and intellectual procedures, and evaluate the resulting theories in terms of their doing justice to and explaining the relevant phenomena. Such pragmatism about theories and theoretical reasoning is unexceptionable, in philosophical contexts as elsewhere.

Hume, by contrast, argued that the many apparently irresolvable conflicts among philosophical systems are due simply to the occurrence in those systems of terms that literally have no meaning. We can accordingly get rid of such fruitless clashes by testing the relevant vocabulary for meaningfulness. The proper use of this method, he urged, "might render every dispute equally intelligible, and banish all that jargon, which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings, and drawn disgrace upon them" (21). But whatever one's diagnosis of and prescription for the plethora of incompatible systems, success in philosophical work plainly requires that we largely operate independently of them. Dewey is doubtless right that their incommensurability results from the way each system incorporates and builds on assumptions not shared by others. And as Plato argued, it is self-defeating and fruitless to reason from hypotheses taken simply as given;<sup>10</sup> we must subject all hypotheses and assumptions to scrutiny, taking none as privileged or immune to revision.<sup>11</sup>

The merits of Dewey's pragmatist methodology and Hume's quasi-verificationism aside, the character of the mutually incompatible philosophical systems that concerned them point towards an explanation of the role in philosophy of its history. The careful study of any of the great systems reveals a plethora of connections among various issues of interest in philosophical work, issues that, considered on their own, typically seem largely independent of one another. Because the ties these systems articulate among such issues tend to hold across a variety of systems, we can understand those connections without being committed to any particular system. So a system that is arguably mistaken and wrongheaded in every other way may nonetheless be especially revealing about the connections that hold among seemingly disparate issues. One need not be at all tempted by the specific claims in Kant's critical philosophy or Hegel's

*Phenomenology of Mind* to learn much about the connections among various issues that these systematic works articulate.

Unlike the work of great philosophical system builders, contemporary work tends to focus on individual issues or small clusters of them. This tight focus has proved exceptionally salutary. Although many major theoretical disagreements remain, such careful work has charted out areas of broad agreement, and has crystallized in fruitful ways the major theoretical divides that require further work. But a corresponding disadvantage in studying such contemporary work is that it seldom provides an opportunity to explore the many important connections among the various issues that individually receive such careful attention.

The study of major works in the history of philosophy, by contrast, offers rich opportunities to explore these connections. Any of the great works in the standard canon of Western philosophy reveal a multitude of ties among philosophical questions that afford students an appreciation of the scope and nature of philosophical work. And this advantage of studying such works is wholly independent of "those astounding differences of philosophic belief that startle the beginner and that become the plaything of the expert." And because the connections among issues are largely independent of particular positions taken on the issues themselves, we need not evaluate the beliefs that particular philosophical systems embody to learn much about those connections. The great systems provide intellectual scaffolds for issues, through which we learn about the connections among them, independent of whatever positions we may come to take on those issues.

## 6. Interpretation and the History of Philosophy

The variety of competing systems that occur in the history of philosophy suggests a second way in which studying in which history can be useful, once again independently of the merits of specific claims and arguments found in any system. The problematic feature of these systems to which Dewey dramatically drew attention is that they are not only incompatible, but incompatible in ways that seem to resist resolution. This apparent recalcitrance to resolution results in the scandalous aspect of philosophical work that Hume complains of. How can the best thinkers in any respectable intellectual discipline hold such incompatible views? And how can a respectable field of inquiry harbor such incompatible views that for so long resist any serious resolution, and with no promise of resolution in sight?

But that very feature of philosophical systems, however frustrating, encourages an intellectual activity essential to philosophical thinking. Understanding what others say invariably calls for some measure of interpretation. This interpretive activity must answer to three constraints, which can occasionally pull in different directions. Most basic is our construal of individual words homophonically, as meaning what we would mean by them, where such construal is largely independent of context. But we also seek to interpret others' remarks so as to

make them come out true as often as possible, at least true by our lights. In interpreting others' remarks, we understand them as much as possible both as using words as we do and as making claims that we can endorse.

These two interpretive goals can collide; sometimes our projecting our way of using words onto others results in seeing them as saying something untrue. We then have a choice between construing the relevant remarks as false and seeing them as involving what we regard as a nonstandard use of words. Typically we adjudicate automatically between these competing possibilities, but it may sometimes be that nothing tips the balance.

There is, in addition, a third factor that sometimes comes into play. Statements often fall into patterns of inference, and when they do we try to interpret those remarks so as to see those inferences as valid. And even when another's remarks do not fall into explicit inferences, we try to construe their remarks as jointly compatible, which involves the kind of connection that figures in inference. Two remarks are jointly compatible only if each fails to imply the denial of the other. As with the constraints of homophonic interpretation and construing remarks as true by our lights, this third desideratum again may conflict with the other two. We may be able to preserve our use of words and truth as we see it only by construing another's remarks as jointly inconsistent or as constituting an invalid inference.

Interpretation accordingly involves the charitable maximizing of three factors: seeing others as using words as we do, as making true statements, and as advancing valid arguments and mutually compatible claims. When these constraints conflict, as they often do when others differ with us, we must somehow strike a balance among them.

Applying charity of interpretation in these three ways to the things others say typically is wholly effortless and occurs without our noticing it, but it is also unavoidable.<sup>12</sup> And the way we balance constraints pertaining to words, statements, and inferences is also typically automatic and effortless. But when it seems that we cannot satisfy all three constraints, we are likely to think consciously about how to construe the remarks in question, and therefore how to balance the three desiderata. As the things others say increasingly diverge from anything we ourselves are inclined to say, the likelihood increases correspondingly that the need to construe and so to balance the three constraints will explicitly command our attention.

The things people say very likely never conflict more dramatically than what we find when we examine the great philosophical systems. The "astounding differences of philosophic belief that startle the beginner" to which Dewey called attention doubtless present as great a challenge to charitable interpretation as we can find anywhere. How can we charitably construe the conflicting claims and arguments of such systems? Even if one is partial to the views embodied in one particular family of systems, how can we charitably interpret those systems that are starkly incompatible with our favored view?

Sharp disagreements occur also in the contemporary philosophical literature, but nothing like those that characterize the great classical systems. For one



thing, it is typically pretty clear how to understand the words used in the contemporary literature. Though advocates of different positions do sometimes use words in divergent ways, the general convergence of idiom that occurs in the contemporary literature often obscures such divergence. Nor is there serious difficulty in understanding the disputes; in the ordinary case an author argues against specific claims or arguments couched explicitly in the other person's words.

Conflicts among the classical systems are typically more difficult to calibrate. In part this is because in developing a system, other authors are seldom mentioned. But the more important factor is that the systems tend to differ from one another in holistic ways that often cannot be captured in any unique way. We may seek to encapsulate the difference between Plato and Aristotle about form and between Hume and Kant about whether relations of ideas and matters of fact exhaust the possibilities. But even there the two parties to each dispute would differ about how to characterize their dispute.

Moreover, such disagreements typically affect every aspect of the philosophers' systematic thinking, leaving little that we can construe in a neutral, independent way. This raises challenges for the charitable interpretation of both parties to such a dispute. There is little one can say about what such systematic thinkers mean that does not require extensive interpretive work.

The study of the history of philosophy accordingly affords an especially rich opportunity to practice in the interpreting of challenging texts and to sharpen one's interpretive skills. Indeed, this is the major activity in such study. The great systems are seldom presented as a model for how to engage in philosophical inquiry or what to think about particular issues. Rather, our work on the challenging problems of interpretation that those systems present us with results in our being able to construe all philosophical writing, including the contemporary literature, in subtler and more systematic ways. The most productive readings of classical philosophical texts are typically those that most successfully maximize and balance these three interpretive constraints. So our reading systematic work in the history of philosophy forces us to make our interpretive activity explicit, and so to consider how to balance the homophonic translation of words against the charitable construal of assertions and arguments. Practice with charitable interpretation of difficult texts is therefore a second way in which the study of the history of philosophy can be important.<sup>13</sup>

As with the first explanation for the emphasis of philosophy on its history, which appealed to connections among seemingly disparate issues, this second explanation is again independent of how we evaluate claims and arguments that occur in the works we study. Indeed, as noted earlier, it is because most classical texts are questionable in respect of their claims and arguments that the need for extensive interpretive work in studying the history of philosophy is not only necessary, but also obvious.

## 7. Transcending the Systems

There is a yet another benefit that can come from studying the great philosophical systems. Though it is seldom that any of those systems strikes anybody today as having gotten things right, the way these systems clash about specific issues sometimes provides an opportunity to transcend theoretical conflicts between those systems.

As noted in section 5, the fruitless disagreements among the great systems typically result from the adoption by each system of specific hypotheses or assumptions rejected by other systems. The interpretation of these systems can help crystallize the undefended assumptions that operate in this way. So in addition to giving us practice in charitable interpretation, studying the great systems can also stimulate us to think about how to go beyond the question-begging assumptions those systems embody, and thereby reach a stable, defensible position on the relevant issues.

There are several ways this can happen. We may come up with a salutary reformulation of questions or a change of subject, which resolves an issue while sidestepping or disposing of the conflict that dominated earlier thinking. Or by isolating the undefended assumptions that led to such controversy, one may be able simply to approach the issue in a way that steers clear of those assumptions. So the study of fruitless disputes among the great systems can suggest novel ways to come to terms with the issues those systems failed to resolve. This is sometimes a third benefit of studying the history of philosophy.

The foregoing explanations of the importance of the history of philosophy point to a striking parallel philosophy has with the other so-called humanities. We expose ourselves and our students to the great works of music, literature, and the visual arts in part because these are examples of the best that has been done, and sometimes, we may think, the best that can be done. Similarly with the great works of philosophy. But the problem was that, unlike music, literature, and the arts, philosophy aims at getting the truth about things. And if the great works of past philosophers don't do that, why study them?

An acceptable explanation for the central role in philosophy of its history must therefore be independent of whether any of the great historical systems do get at the truth about things. And the explanations offered here satisfy that demand. Independent of getting at such truths, these works display a multitude of important connections that various issues have with one another. And independent of getting at such truths, studying those works sharpens our interpretive skills in ways that the study of contemporary work in a largely familiar idiom tends not to do. Finally, such study can suggest new approaches to issues that transcend the conflicts the great systems embody. It is these benefits that warrant the central place in philosophy of its history. As with the other humanities, we study the history of philosophy for reasons independent of the search for truth.

There is an important pedagogical moral that we can draw from these reasons for studying the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy is some-



times presented to students in bite-sized selections, as though to put on offer a kind of zoology of odd philosophical positions and arguments. Such brief selections may well serve to make students familiar with the major touchstones of the field, putting them in the picture as regards the divergent views which have dominated past discussion and debate. But such brief selections are unlikely to exhibit many connections among superficially disparate issues, offer much of an opportunity to sharpen one's interpretive skills, or suggest ways of transcending past systematic discussions. If the foregoing argument is correct, we should expose students to selections of historical works sufficiently large to give them a sense of rich systematic connections and daunting interpretive challenges.

### Notes

1. For further examples, see David M. Rosenthal, "Philosophy and its History," in *The Institution of Philosophy*, ed. Avner Cohen and Marcelo Dascal (Peru, Illinois: Open Court, 1989), 141-176, § 3.
2. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), e.g., 378, and chs. VII and VIII; and *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, vol. 1 of Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
3. See, e.g., Shaun Gallagher, "Conversations in Postmodern Hermeneutics," in *Liotard: Philosophy, Politics and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (London: Routledge, 2002), 49-60.
4. J. J. C. Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes," in *The Philosophy of Mind*, ed. V. C. Chappell (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962; New York: Dover, 1981), 160-172; D. M. Armstrong, "The Causal Theory of Mind," *Neue Hefte für Philosophie*, Heft 11, 1977, 82-95; reprinted in slightly revised version in his *The Nature of Mind* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1980), 16-31.
5. "Incorrigibility as the Mark of the Mental," *The Journal of Philosophy* LXVII, 12 (June 25, 1970): 399-424, and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ch. 2. For more on these issues, see Rosenthal, "Mentality and Neutrality," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXIII, 13 (July 15, 1976): 386-415, and "Keeping Matter in Mind," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, V (1980): 295-322.
6. See, e.g., "Criteria and Necessity," *Noûs* VII, 4 (November 1973): 313-329, and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Part II.
7. *The Structure of Appearance*, second edition (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), xix.
8. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago & London: Open Court, 1925; revised edition, New York: Norton and London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), 30; reprinted in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. I, edited by Jo Ann Boydston, associate textual editors, Patricia Baysinger and Barbara Levine (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 35.
9. Hume, David, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edn. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 11.
10. *Republic*, 511a2-8.

11. Cf. W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From A Logical Point of View*, second edition, revised (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), 20-46, esp. § 6.

12. On the need for charitable interpretation, see Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), § 13; "Carnap and Logical Truth," in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, revised and enlarged edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 107-33; and Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 2nd edition, 2001, essays 9-11. On an interesting way in which we must balance constraints on charitable interpretation, see Quine, *Philosophy of Logic* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), ch. 6.

13. For more on this second explanation, see Rosenthal, "Philosophy and Its History," §4.