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History of Philosophy as a Source of Meaning

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1 | INTRODUCTION

It is a familiar fact about philosophy as currently practised that it includes, as a central element, the study of its own history. Even in degree programs emphasizing analytic philosophy, where history of philosophy typically receives less attention than in programs focused on the Continental tradition, students are generally required to take courses not just on contemporary topics, but on the canonical philosophers of the past.[1] Moreover, many introductory courses on contemporary issues—for example ethics, metaphysics or philosophy of mind— begin by introducing students to the views of historical figures in the relevant areas. Outside the classroom, philosophers working on contemporary issues often refer back to the views of historical figures, and there is a general expectation in philosophical discussion that participants will have some idea of what is meant when a view is referred to Aristotelian or Cartesian, or Humean. Conversely, specialists in the history of philosophy are expected to have many of the same philosophical skills that are exercised in contemporary discussions, as well as to be somewhat familiar with the current landscape in the areas whose history they address.

What makes this fact worth noticing is that it marks a contrast with most other academic disciplines, for which the history of the discipline falls outside the discipline itself. Universities do not require that students of chemistry learn about alchemy or phlogiston theory, that beginning biologists study Aristotle's work on embryology or the motion of animals, or that aspiring mathematicians familiarize themselves with the work of Euclid or Euler. And although scholars who work on the history of, say, chemistry need to have some understanding of chemistry as currently practised, they are not typically based in departments of chemistry, and no-one considers their work to be part of the practice of chemistry. The history of the physical and life sciences is seen, not as belonging to those sciences,

[1]By "history of philosophy" in this context I mean what philosophers usually mean by "history of philosophy," namely the study of historical texts in philosophy. Going by the words alone, the expression "history of philosophy" might be interpreted as referring to the social and intellectual history of the discipline and its institutions, as in, say, Bruce Kuklick's work on American philosophy in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries (Kuklick 1977), but that is not how it is usually understood by philosophers; in particular "history of philosophy" is usually understood as distinct from "history of (philosophical) ideas." This somewhat complicates the question I will go on to consider, of why philosophy is unlike other disciplines in including the study of its own history—are we in fact studying the history of our discipline when we do history of philosophy?—but not seriously. There is still an important question about why philosophy includes the study of historical texts, and the use of "history of …" to refer to this study is parallel to its use in other disciplines like mathematics, economics, and psychology. A further terminological issue is that talk of the "history of" a discipline can refer either to the actual diachronic succession of thinkers and texts leaidng up to the present state of the discipline, or to the study of that diachronic succession and/or the thinkers and texts that figure in it. While the ambiguity could be resolved by using "history" for the first and "historiography" for the second, I prefer to follow common usage and to rely on context to disambiguate the two senses.

but instead as an independent discipline of the history of science, or as part of intellectual history more broadly. In the case of the social sciences, there is a somewhat closer connection between engaging in one's discipline and studying its history. In areas like political theory, psychology and economics, university curricula in the corresponding department do sometimes include courses in the history of the relevant field. And, regarding research in the field of economics specifically, the history of economic thought is recognized as a part of economics rather than as a part of intellectual history, even though many economists question its value and importance.[2] However, even taking into account the social sciences, philosophy's attitude to its own history remains distinctive in at least two respects: first, the degree to which expertise in philosophy is assumed to require a grounding in the history of the discipline, and, second, the closeness with which research in the history of philosophy is integrated with research in the discipline itself.

The contrast I have been describing between philosophy and other academic disciplines has been pointed out many times, and over the last fifty years there has been a fair amount of discussion about why philosophy bears this distinctive relation to its history. One form the discussion has taken is to ask why the history of philosophy is important to philosophy as currently practiced: what value is provided to philosophy generally by our practice of teaching, and doing research on, historical texts. Some philosophers have been interested in the question at least in part because they see the answer as important for determining how history of philosophy should be done.[3] Knowing why we are pursuing the history of philosophy might determine, for example, whether it makes most sense to engage in rational reconstruction of historical texts—an approach taken by Peter Strawson and Jonathan Bennett among others—or whether we should attempt as far as possible to understand historical texts in the context of their own time, as for example in the work of Michael Ayers and Daniel Garber. Others have seen it simply as an interesting philosophical question in its own right. Questions about the methodology of philosophy, and about how there can be such a thing as philosophical knowledge or insight, have always been part of philosophy itself, and so it is natural for philosophers to ask why history should be part of our methodology in a way that it is not for practitioners of other disciplines. For the most part, participants in the discussion have taken for granted that the history of philosophy is important to philosophy, so the aim has not been to defend this aspect of philosophical practice, but rather simply to account for it There have indeed been philosophers who are skeptical about the value of the history of philosophy to philosophy itself—famously Gil Harman at Princeton used to have a sign on his door saying "History of Philosophy: Just Say No!"—and I have heard that he used to regularly purge his library of books and articles that were more than ten years old.[4] But for most of those who have raised the issue of philosophy's relation to its history, the question has been why history is part of the practice of philosophy, and not whether it should be.

An exception, however, is a recent article by Hanno Sauer, which argues that there is no good reason why the history of philosophy should be regarded as essential to philosophy.[5] If, as Sauer believes, our interest as philosophers is in finding solutions to enduring philosophical problems, and if, as he also believes, there has been genuine progress in philosophy over the centuries, then it is reasonable to assume that the most recent solutions on offer are superior to their predecessors. But in that case, Sauer argues, we should focus our attention on those recent solutions only. While studying the philosophers of the past might be intrinsically interesting, the opportunity costs outweigh the potential benefits, and our limited time and energy would be better spent reading our contemporaries. He concludes by recommending what he calls a "healthy dose of historical amnesia to counterbalance the burden imposed by the weight of history," although he observes, with deliberate irony, that this prescription was already offered by Nietzsche a century and a half ago. Sauer arrives at his conclusion in part by surveying various reasons that have been considered for the

[2]See Blaug 2001, which aims to address widespread challenges to the idea that the history of economic thought should be studied as part as part of economics. Blaug notes that some historians of economics have proposed breaking away from economics and forming alliances instead with historians of science, but that most historians of economics "loudly reject" this proposal (2001, 146).

[3]E.g. Rée 1978 (see 28ff), Rorty 1984, Lin 2013.

[4]For the "Just Say No!" reference, as well as Harman's own clarification of what he intended by the sign on his office door, see Sorell 2005, 43–44. It is worth noting, however, that Harman makes repeated reference to Aristotle, Kant, and especially Hume in his influential introductory book on morality (1977).

[5]Sauer 2022. See also Glock 2008 for a critique of the view that the history of philosophy is essential to philosophy—although he is more sympathetic than Sauer to the idea that the history of philosophy can still be of benefit to philosophy.

importance of the history of philosophy, and arguing that none of them are satisfactory, at least for someone whose primary aim in philosophy is to address philosophical problems in contemporary terms.

In this paper I shall use Sauer's challenge as a jumping-off point for introducing what I think is the most fundamental answer to the question why philosophy needs to include the history of philosophy: namely, that the history of philosophy gives meaning to the words we use in raising philosophical questions, and that we need to be familiar with history in order to understand those words and thus to grasp the corresponding concepts. With the possible exception of a famous remark by Wilfrid Sellars, which I will consider at the end of this paper, I have not seen this answer presented in the literature.[6] But I think that the idea of the history of philosophy as a source of meaning is worth considering both as a defence and as an explanation of philosophy's special relation to its history, so it will be my main focus in this paper. Before getting to it, I prepare the way by considering, in section 2, some of the more commonly discussed answers to the question, and Sauer's responses to them. I then turn, in section 3, to the alternative rationale for the history of philosophy that I want to propose, arguing that this rationale holds even if we grant Sauer's claim that all the others are unsatisfactory. In section 4 I address some objections, and, in section 5, I conclude with a brief comment on how my view relates to that of Sellars.

2 | THREE COMMONLY CITED RATIONALES FOR HISTORY

I want to consider three answers that have often been given to the question why the history of philosophy is important to philosophy. Here I shall be drawing primarily on my own understanding of the relevant literature rather than on Sauer's presentation, although, as we shall see, these are all answers which Sauer considers and rejects. The first answer is that the history of philosophy serves as a storehouse of valuable insights, not represented in contemporary philosophy, on which we can draw in searching for our own solutions to philosophical problems. Michael Ayers represents this view when he characterizes the history of philosophy as "an invaluable repository of unfashionable truth" (1991, 8). So does Robert Pasnau, when he writes that "philosophers who limit themselves to the present … deprive themselves of a vast sea of conceptual resources" (2011). And a version of this answer is also implicit in Jonathan Bennett's suggestion that we should follow Grice in "treat[ing those who are great but dead as if they were great and living, as persons who have something to say to us now' (Grice 1986: 66, quoted in Bennett 2001, 1-2). (Somewhat less flatteringly, but in the same spirit, Rachel Barney quotes an unnamed colleague who describes the history of philosophy as a "magnificent junkyard", although she herself endorses that view only to a limited extent (2014, 25).) The second answer, superficially in contrast with the first, but in fact compatible with it, is that studying history is important so that we can learn from our predecessors' mistakes, with the implication that this will help us to avoid them. Bennett suggests this kind of answer when he writes, in connection with Spinoza, that "[t]he failures have at least as much to teach us as the successes" (Bennett 1984, 34).[7] It is also suggested by Bernard Williams's remark, alluding to Santanaya's famous warning, that "those who are ignorant of the history of philosophy are doomed to recapitulate it (not just reinventing the wheel, but reinventing the square wheel)" (Williams 2000, 204, quoted in Sauer 2022, 9).[8] A third answer refrains from any judgment about the intrinsic value of earlier

[6]There is a hint of it, for the case of economics, in Blaug 2001: Blaug writes that the history of economic thought has "potentially wide applicability for many students in getting a "deeper" or "gut-level" understanding of a wide range of concepts" (150). I shall argue the stronger point that, for most philosophical concepts, we cannot grasp them at all without some reliance on the history of philosophy. Gary Hatfield also alludes briefly to this kind of rationale when he writes that, for some philosophical texts, "even to read the words on the page with comprehension necessitates some degree of immersion in the literature surrounding a given text," where that literature includes texts by historical predecessors (Hatfield 2005, 91).

[7]Bennett discuss this idea further in 2001, 5–6.

[8]Jonathan Rée (1978, 28) ascribes a view like this to the analytic philosophers of his time, quoting R.M. Hare's remark that "[p]hilosophical mistakes are like dandelions in the garden; however carefully one eradicates them there are sure to be some more next year, and it is difficult to think of novel ways of getting rid of their familiar faces" (1969, 240). It is not clear that Hare himself intended this as part of an answer to the question of why the history of philosophy is important to philosophy, but it was certainly my impression as an undergraduate at Oxford in the 1970s that—with some exceptions, notably Ayers, whom I was immensely fortunate to have as my tutor—the general attitude towards the history of philosophy was that it was a source of errors to be diagnosed rather than insights to be learned from.

philosophical work, and instead locates the importance of the history of philosophy in the way that it allows us to appreciate the contingency of our own views, and thus leads to fruitful questioning of the philosophical assumptions we might otherwise take for granted. Williams speaks of history of philosophy, in this connection, as "making the familiar look strange, and conversely" (2000, 478n; see also 1994, 26–27), and Daniel Garber finds support for the view in a passage from Descartes which compares engaging with past thinkers to travelling abroad (2013, 355f).

Sauer finds each of these answers unsatisfactory. First, against the suggestion that we need history so that we can learn from the insights of the great philosophers of the past, Sauer counters that the canonical philosophers of the past were not in fact particularly great. He points out that they were more poorly informed and less technically competent than present-day philosophers (2022, 12–16). Moreover, he claims, since there are more people alive now than ever lived in the past, we are statistically more likely to find the most important philosophers among our contemporaries than among people from earlier historical periods (2022, 16–19). Sauer is also unsympathetic to the proposal that it is useful to study the philosophers of the past to learn from, and in particular to avoid, their mistakes. He responds that, if we want to avoid their mistakes, the best thing to do is to refrain from reading them: engaging with their work is liable to "bias … us in their favor" rather than to "inoculate..[us] against [their] blunders" (2022, 9). Third, regarding the usefulness of history in getting us to see the contingency of our own assumptions, and thus to question philosophical orthodoxy, Sauer argues that the same purposes can be achieved more effectively by other means. We can understand the contingency of our philosophical beliefs by studying, say, psychology, biology, or cultural history (2022, 9), and if our aim is to simply avoid unfruitful philosophical conformity we can do so by reading novels or exploring other disciplines (2022, 10). Moreover, according to Sauer, the need to recognize the contingency of our philosophical beliefs arguably depends on overestimating the role played by intuition in arriving at philosophical results. To the extent that we reject the idea that philosophy relies on intuitions, it becomes less important to come to appreciate the contingency of those intuitions (2022, 8).

I do not think that Sauer succeeds in undermining any of these answers. In suggesting that we should focus on our contemporaries, since the best philosophers are likely to be among them, he does not consider the difficulty of determining which of our many contemporaries deserve our sustained attention. The canonical philosophers of the past have at least withstood the so-called test of time. Although the processes of canon-formation are undoubtedly flawed, the fact that these philosophers have continued to be valued over generations, despite changes in intellectual fashions, provides at least some assurance that it is worth trying to understand their views in spite of the difficulties involved in interpreting them. Moreover, our contemporaries are often no less difficult to interpret—they introduce new technical terminology, they construct complex arguments that are often hard to follow, they assume knowledge of the work of other philosophers that we then need to read and interpret in turn. It is not always so clear, in the case of our own contemporaries, what the tradeoff is between the effort involved in studying their writings and the insights we are likely to gain from doing so. Turning now to the statistical argument that we are more likely to find great philosophers among our contemporaries simply because of the increased size of the pool, Sauer assumes that the conditions that make for great philosophy are evenly distributed across time. But there is no reason to think this is so. It could be that certain historical circumstances—for example in Athens in the fifth century BCE, or in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe in the wake of the "scientific revolution"—were ideal for engendering excellent philosophical thought.[9] Conversely, it may well be that the current circumstances in which most philosophers now work, which involve extreme pressure to publish early in one's career, as well as heavy teaching and administrative burdens, make it especially difficult for the best philosophy to flourish.

More briefly, regarding the second reason, I think Sauer is wrong to suppose that the best way to avoid the mistakes of our predecessors is simply not to read them, as opposed to reading them to try to understand where, and why, they went wrong. To the extent that there are genuine mistakes in philosophy, they likely arise from natural tendencies of thought that we are inclined to fall into in any case. So it can be useful, perhaps indispensable, to study

[9]Pasnau 2011 comments in this connection on the unevenness of philosophical progress, noting that "[p]erhaps the very best historical era ever came at the very start, in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle."

well-developed forms of these supposed mistakes and to learn how subsequent philosophers criticized them, in order not to fall into them ourselves.

And in connection with the third reason—again, briefly—I think that Sauer underestimates the need for positive philosophical alternatives to current ways of thinking if we are not to take them for granted as reflecting how things must be. The recognition that we might have had different philosophical beliefs if human psychology had been different, or if evolutionary or cultural history had taken a different course, is not enough on its own to call into question our own philosophical ways of thinking: what we need is to be confronted with concrete alternatives and to appreciate what made them attractive to the philosophers who endorsed them. And even if philosophy relies less on intuitions than has often been supposed, philosophical reasoning always has starting-points and makes assumptions that it is part of the business of philosophy to examine. So history of philosophy still has a role to play helping us recognize that these starting-points and assumptions need not be compulsory.

These answers aside, we might also challenge Sauer by questioning some of the assumptions on which his own arguments rest. Sauer assumes that the primary aim of philosophers is to find the best available solutions to a set of perennial problems, and he also assumes that we are making progress in achieving this aim. Our solutions, he thinks, are approximating ever more closely to the truth, and that is why we can safely disregard those of our predecessors. But even though philosophy often does take the form of offering solutions to philosophical problems, it is not obvious that we pursue philosophy primarily for the sake of the solutions themselves. Rather, the value of philosophy might lie in the increased understanding of the problems yielded by the search for solutions and the attempt to defend them against alternatives. Thus, if philosophy makes progress, it is not necessarily because the more recently offered solutions are better than, and thus supersede, the earlier ones; it might instead be because the continuing efforts to arrive at solutions have put us in a position to understand the issues better than we did before. In contrast to the natural sciences, on this picture, earlier solutions are not refuted by later ones. There is still progress, but it lies in the fact that the more recent vantage point gives us a broader view of the range of possibilities for addressing the problem and so, at least potentially, a more comprehensive grasp of it.[10]

3 | AN ALTERNATIVE RATIONALE: HISTORY AS A SOURCE OF MEANING

I believe that there is merit to all three of the answers we have considered, and I have just tried to show that Sauer's arguments do not succeed in undermining them. In the remainder of this paper, I want to explore a different reason for engagement with the history of philosophy, one that holds even if we reject the reasons mentioned so far, and even if we accept Sauer's conception of philosophical progress. I want to argue that we need the history of philosophy because, without it, we do not adequately understand the words and expressions that we use in philosophy. Here I do not just have in mind words like "Cartesian" or "Aristotelian" or "Fregean," which, as I have already noted, we typically expect other philosophers to understand, at least to a limited extent. Rather, as I shall argue, the point applies to words with no apparent historical reference: words like "mind", "knowledge," "meaning," and "reality."

We can put the argument in terms of a reductio of Sauer's challenge to the need for history. In identifying the aim of philosophy as developing solutions to philosophical problems, Sauer takes for granted that we know what those problems are. They include, he says, such questions as: what is knowledge and how do we acquire it? how

[10]Sauer "doubt[s] that many historians of philosophy will be eager to accept" the conclusion that "there is no progress in philosophy, at least not of the kind we find in the sciences" and he suggests that accepting this conclusion, in defence of the history of philosophy, is tantamount to "indicting the whole discipline" of philosophy (2022, 6). But the idea that progress in philosophy differs from progress in science is not, in fact, an unusual view for historians of philosophy (or philosophers generally) to take. For example, taking a view of philosophical progress related to the one suggested here, Anthony Kenny holds that it is "not a matter of expanding knowledge, of acquiring new truths about the world, [but] of understanding, that is to say of organizing,what is known" (2005, 16). Martin Lin sees a significant quantitative difference: philosophical progress takes place on a "massively longer" time scale from progress in the natural sciences (2013, 372). Barney suggests that, as with science, philosophy can make local, incremental progress within paradigms (e.g. within pre-Socratic philosophy or within eighteenth-century philosophy), but, in contrast to science, without there being progress over a larger historical span in which paradigms replace one another (2014).

does the human mind work? what is the relationship between the physical and the mental? is there free will?[11] But, we can now ask, what puts us in a position to understand these questions?[12] On the face of it, the words and phrases that figure in these questions —expressions like "mind," "knowledge," "linguistic meaning," and "free will"— seem quite familiar: we understand them simply because we have learned English. However, the familiarity is deceptive. For the meaning that these terms derive from their everyday contexts is not sufficient to determine how to use them in philosophical contexts. When we learn words like "mind" or "knowledge" outside a philosophical context, we obtain the kind of mastery which allows us to use them appropriately for everyday purposes. We learn, for example, when we can say that someone has changed her mind, has an idea in mind, is of two minds, or is losing her mind; we can also make sense of the distinction between a mental and a physical illness (schizophrenia or manic depression as opposed to lupus or pneumonia) or between mental arithmetic and calculating with the help of paper and pencil. Or we learn to describe someone appropriately as knowing how to play the piano, knowing London, knowing when the museum closes, or knowing that today is Saturday. But this understanding of the terms does not put us in a position to understand philosophical questions like the ones Sauer identifies. We might, based on our ordinary grasp of the terms, come up with some interpretation of the questions: for example we might understand the question how the human mind works as a question about how the human brain works, or we might understand the relation between the mental and physical as exemplified by the role of bodily exercise in improving mental health, or of emotional stress in triggering physical illness. But we would not be able to understand these questions in the way that philosophers do. For the ordinary criteria for the use of these words do not extend to their use in philosophical contexts. Here I am drawing on an idea from Wittgenstein, that "philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday* [*feiert*]."[13] At least one implication of this idea is that when we use ordinary words in doing philosophy, they are no longer bound by the usual criteria for intelligible use: they float free from the constraints that are associated with their everyday employment.

Part of what I think Wittgenstein wants to convey with this idea is that we simply do not know how to make sense of the kinds of claims that we make about, say, minds or knowledge in philosophical contexts, any more than— to cite another passage from Wittgenstein—we know how to make sense of a claim like "It's five o'clock on the sun."[14] The expression "five o'clock" simply loses its meaning when we try to apply it outside of the ordinary contexts in which we learned to use it; the same, Wittgenstein suggests, is true of a word like "mind," used, say, in the context of the mind–body problem or the problem of other minds. So the moral that Wittgenstein draws from the inability of ordinary contexts to determine philosophical meaning is a pessimistic one, at least as far as philosophy is concerned: our use of words in framing philosophical questions and answers is unintelligible. I want to draw a conclusion which is less pessimistic, and which brings in the history of philosophy. *Pace* Wittgenstein, we are able to use these words intelligibly, but we can do so only to the extent that we are able to draw not only on their everyday use, but also on their use in a philosophical tradition with which we are all, to some extent, familiar. The word "mind" does, then, have a meaning in a philosophical context—that is, we can understand philosophical claims about, say, how minds relate to bodies or about how we have access to what is going on in our own minds or those of others— but that is only because it has derived its meaning from the history of its use by philosophers. Most of us first learned how to use the word "mind" in a philosophical context by being introduced to Descartes's first and second Meditations, in which Descartes takes us through an exercise of supposing, first, that we are dreaming, and second that we are being deceived by an evil genius. Famously, the doubt engendered by the evil genius hypothesis is

[11]See Sauer 2022, 2–3 and 23.

[12]We might also ask how we know that these are the right questions to raise, since problems change over time, and we might need the history of philosophy to determine which questions count as philosophical and to justify our choice of which questions to address. See Rée 1978, 2; Rorty 1984, 63–64. Sauer addresses this further question briefly by claiming that many questions are perennial and that his denial of the need for history at least applies to the pursuit of those questions (2022, 23). However, several of the "perennial" questions he cites, for example about the "relationship between the physical and the mental" (which in my view makes sense only in a post-Cartesian explanatory framework), seem to me to be historically conditioned; and in any case, the argument against history is seriously weakened if, for example, we still need the history of philosophy in order to justify our pursuit of questions that have arisen recently, say, about aesthetic value, linguistic meaning, artificial intelligence, or the reality of race and gender.

[13]Wittgenstein 2009, §39. Emphasis in the original.

[14]Wittgenstein 2009, §§350–351

powerful enough to call into question everything we believe, except the existence of something designated by the word "I" and which thinks. Engaging with Descartes' arguments in the first two Meditations is, for most of us, the first step to understanding the word "mind" in a philosophical as opposed to an everyday context. The mind is, at a first approximation, what Descartes is referring to when, in the grip of radical doubt, he is nonetheless able to affirm the existence of a "thinking thing." Understanding what Descartes means by "mind"[15] allows us to make some sense of the question of how the mind is related to the body: it allows us to consider not only Descartes' view that mind and body are distinct, but also the opposing hypothesis, that the "thinking thing" designated by Descartes is actually a body, or a brain, or a whole human being.

Learning how Descartes uses the word "mind" is a part of learning what it means in a philosophical context, but it is not all we need to learn in order to understand the kinds of questions that philosophers raise about minds. For, as far as we can tell from Descartes's own understanding of what a mind is, it has of necessity to be self-conscious: for Descartes, it makes no sense to suppose that there could be contents of the mind of which we are unaware.[16] It is also no part of Descartes's conception of mind that there could be natural laws, analogous to the laws of motion, governing the workings of mind, or that the mind could be amenable to scientific study. Thus many contemporary questions about the nature of the mind—Sauer's question about how the mind works, or questions about how animal minds differ from human minds, or questions about whether large language models could have minds—do not make sense on a purely Cartesian conception of the mind. What allows us to think about these questions and to talk meaningfully about them is that we now have a broader understanding of what could potentially count as a mind. And we have that in part because we are at least somewhat familiar not just with Descartes, but with a history of reactions to Descartes: for example, the view in Spinoza and Leibniz that there can be subconscious mental activity, and that minds can come in various degrees of sophistication; and Hume's view that the activity of the mind is governed by natural laws of association. Whether or not we are explicitly conscious of it, the contemporary meaning of the word "mind" is derived from this history of uses.

Here again I want to motivate my picture by reference to Wittgenstein: specifically Wittgenstein's idea that understanding words, at the most fundamental level, is a matter of knowing "how to go on" from examples of their use.[17] As children, we learned to understand words like "chair" or "fetch" or "no" by being exposed to a wide range of uses in our early years. Having heard the word "chair" applied to side chairs, armchairs, basket chairs, and deckchairs—as opposed, say, to, benches, stools, and sofas—we come to recognize its appropriateness also to new examples of chairs, such as director's chairs, ski-lift chairs, and electric chairs. Wittgenstein develops this idea in his discussions of the word "game": we come to learn the concept of "game" by being given examples of games like tennis or chess or hopscotch and coming to recognize what does and does not belong with those examples. Relatedly, I am suggesting, our knowledge of how to "go on" with a word like "mind" in philosophical as opposed to ordinary contexts, is derived from our acquaintance with how it, and related words, have been used by philosophers in the past. It is because we are familiar, even if indirectly, with how philosophers like Descartes, Spinoza and Hume used words like "mind," that we are able to go on to use these words ourselves in different kinds of philosophical contexts, for example considering whether a computer could have a mind, or whether someone's mind could include the content of the notebook in which they record their ideas.[18] Although these questions might seem to be meaningful given ordinary uses of the word "mind," this is an illusion. It is only because the word "mind" has a philosophical history which imposes constraints on how we can use it intelligibly that we are able to make sense of these questions and offer answers to them.

[15]Or, more precisely, its Latin equivalent *mens*. My argument is complicated by the fact that different philosophers write in different languages, and that terms in one language often lack equivalents in others (e.g. in ordinary usage the English word "mind" can be variously translated into the German *Seele*, *Verstand*, or *Meinung*, depending on context). However I do not think that the complication undermines the argument, and I disregard it in what follows.
[16]Although see Hatfield 2005, 116 and 116n67 for textual evidence that Descartes thought that some activities of the mind could escape our notice.
[17]I discuss this idea in Ginsborg 2020.
[18]As on the "extended mind" hypothesis proposed in Clark and Chalmers 1998.

For another example, with somewhat different features, consider the word "realism" in contemporary discussions of moral realism.[19] The word "realism" in a non-philosophical context is typically contrasted with "optimism" and "pessimism"—someone with no philosophical experience will likely interpret "moral realism" as the view that we shouldn't have overly high expectations about people's moral characters. Even if we explain that it is the view that moral norms are real, they will probably assume that to deny moral realism is simply to reject morality—that the only alternative to moral realism is a view on which people can steal or murder as they wish, as long as they can get away with it. As philosophers, I want to suggest, we can understand words like "realism" only to the extent that we are familiar with historical examples of realism and opposing views, both about morality and in other domains. "Realism" has content for us as a philosophical term because of its association with historical positions, understood in opposition to other positions: for example Locke's realism about material objects in contrast to Berkeley's idealism, or Hume's anti-realism about causality, or the moral realism represented by Plato's commitment to a Form of the Good. This example is different from that of the word "mind" in that many of the historical figures associated with debates about realism did not themselves use the word. However the underlying principle is the same: we know how to "go on" with the word "realism" because we are familiar with its use in connection with a history of philosophical views. Without some understanding of that history, we would not be able to give content to philosophical questions about whether moral values are real.

I have been arguing that the history of philosophy is what gives meaning to our philosophical terms, and that, as a result, knowledge of the history of philosophy is essential to understanding them.[20] If this is right, then it offers what is perhaps the most fundamental reason why the history of philosophy has to be an integral part of philosophy, in a way that is not paralleled by other disciplines. We can understand words like "oxygen" or "acid" or "carbohydrate" in scientific contexts without having to know anything about the history of the corresponding concepts: they can be defined, or examples can be shown to us, or we can learn them though a combination of the two. But philosophical terms notoriously resist definition—consider, for example, the history of attempts to define knowledge—and they typically do not pick out observable phenomena that we can easily point to. Moreover, when we do offer definitions of philosophical terms, their success typically turns on whether they capture the meaning of the term as it has been historically understood. And they often do so only if we understand them in a way that tacitly presupposes that historical understanding. Consider again the word "realism." Moral realism is often defined as the view that moral truths are mind-independent.[21] But on that definition, many truths that we typically take to be moral—for example that it is wrong to hurt someone's feelings unnecessarily, or to cause them other forms of suffering—do not count as moral, because they depend on facts about people minds.[22] The definition works only if we put a particular interpretation on the idea of "mind-independent," one which makes room for the idea that a moral truth can hold in virtue of human beings' attitudes and feelings generally, but still be mind-independent in the broader sense endorsed by realists as opposed to, say, constructivists. But we can make that distinction only if we already have a grasp of what realism amounts to, and that in turn, I am suggesting, requires some understanding of which kinds of views, in the history of philosophy, have counted as realist as opposed to anti-realist.

[19]I pick this example because it is an issue with which Sauer himself is concerned. See Sauer 2019.

[20]Does the relevant history have to be history, specifically, of philosophy, or can expressions in philosophical contexts derive their meaning from how they have been used in other disciplines? In some cases, philosophical terms do derive their meanings from how they are used in non-philosophical but philosophy-adjacent fields: for example Kant's use of the term "deduction" is derived from the law, and philosophers' uses of terms like "normative" and "concept" are often influenced by how they have been used in disciplines like legal theory, sociology, and psychology. For the most part, however, it is previous philosophical use that determines how we understand present-day philosophical terms. Thanks to Wayne Martin for raising this question.

[21]Sauer defines moral realism as "the view that there are mind-independent facts about moral norms and values" (2019, 339). It might seem that this formulation avoids the difficulty mentioned below, since it requires only that there be *some* moral facts that do not depend on minds, not that all moral facts are mind-independent. However it rules out the apparently coherent possibility that someone could be a moral realist while also believing that all moral norms and values hold in virtue of facts about human happiness and suffering.

[22]This issue is raised by Russ Shafer-Landau (2003, 15) and Sharon Street (2006, 111).

4 | OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

I have been arguing that the understanding of terms standardly used in philosophy depends on our knowledge of their history of use in philosophical contexts. But it might be objected that at least some philosophers who engage fruitfully with contemporary philosophical questions show no evidence of familiarity with the history of philosophy, at least beyond the literature that immediately precedes, and is closely related to, their own contributions. It is true that numerous recent and contemporary philosophers who have worked in non-historical areas have also made contributions that are specifically focused on historical figures. In this connection, Pasnau lists Anscombe, Geach, Ryle, Russell, Bernard Williams, Korsgaard, Foot, Mackie, Frankfurt, Hursthouse, Sellars, both Strawsons, Armstrong, and Nussbaum, and to this one could add Davidson, McDowell, Brandom, Stroud, and many more. But others, like David Lewis, have seemed, at least on the face of it, to get along quite well without ever having worked on historical themes. How then can they know what they are talking about when they speak of mind, or knowledge, or linguistic meaning, or realism? By way of answer, the view I am suggesting does not imply that an understanding of such terms requires first-hand knowledge of all the historical texts in which the terms figure or in connection with which they have been used. We can at least to some extent piggy-back on the work of more recent philosophers who have themselves read those texts, and whose work is informed by them. The understanding of philosophical terms comes in degrees, and for some purposes it is not necessary to be familiar with the full history of an expression in order to use it intelligibly and productively. Quine and Kripke did not need to be Kant scholars in order to challenge, respectively, the distinctions between the analytic and the synthetic, and between the necessary and the a priori. Nonetheless, reading historical texts is typically the most effective way to acquire basic philosophical concepts, and this, I believe, is the primary reason why we require our beginning students to read them. Simply explaining to students that a priori knowledge is independent of experience does not give them the idea of the a priori, since they can reasonably reply that without some experience human children cannot acquire any knowledge at all, and further explanations—say, that the dependence has to do with justification rather than with causal acquisition—are likely to fall foul of misunderstandings requiring further explanation. A far more effective alternative is to get them to follow along with the thinking of the philosophers responsible for developing the concepts of the a priori and the analytic, something we can do by helping them work through Descartes' distinction between truths that do and do not survive dreaming skepticism, Hume's distinction between matters of fact and relations between ideas, and the argument, new with Kant, that the a priori and the analytic need to be distinguished. Without to some extent having internalized the history of these concepts and the motivations for making the associated distinctions, we do not grasp these concepts at all: at least, not in a way which allows us to go on to use them in our own philosophical thinking.[23]

From what I have just said—and here I am introducing a second objection—it might seem that the need for history of philosophy is limited to its use in teaching undergraduate students, and that we outgrow it once we've become practising philosophers ourselves. But in fact the need for history endures, since it is often the case that philosophical debates turn on the meanings of the words in which the questions at issue are framed, and looking to the history of how those words have been used is the best way, and indeed perhaps the only way, of arriving at an understanding that all parties to the debate can share. For example the question whether perceptual experience has conceptual content, and indeed whether it has content at all, turns crucially on how we understand words like "content," "concept," and "experience." As has emerged in the literature, some of the disagreement turns on how demanding our understanding of the term "concept" is: whether, for example, we think that concept-possession requires linguistic ability or rationality, or whether we think that concepts are the kind of thing that non-human animals can have. The interest of the debate depends on our having a shared understanding of the word "concept," and

[23]It might also be pointed out that many philosophers do not ever think about, and indeed cannot even consciously recall, the historical texts from which they learned to use philosophical terms. But their having been exposed to those texts is still essential to their present grasp of the terms, in the same way that our present understanding of words like "chair" depends on our having been exposed to examples of their use that we can no longer consciously bring to mind.

here, it seems to me, our best hope is to take, as our point of reference, the use of the word "concept" in the historical tradition from which the debate emerged, including Kant and Frege.[24] Since it is not always straightforward to determine how historical philosophers used their words, this is one of the points where it can be useful to contemporary philosophy that there be a sub-discipline of the history of philosophy. While, as noted, we need not all be experts in the history of philosophy in order to have a working understanding of the words we use, we often need the experts to help us clarify the history of their uses in cases where it matters for resolving a philosophical dispute. And sometimes historians of philosophy can help us see how a familiar contemporary debate might have gone astray. I am thinking here, for example, about recent work by Maria Rosa Antognazza on the concept of knowledge in Plato and the early moderns.[25] Specialized historians of philosophy thus play a role in a kind of division of linguistic labor which allows philosophers working on contemporary problems to ignore, at least to some extent, complexities arising from the history of the use of a term, as long as they are willing to defer to the historical experts, or to dig into the relevant historical texts themselves, in cases where the traditional meanings of their words are in question.

A third objection is that my proposal is not fully generalizable. It cannot be, for example, that at the very beginning of philosophy the meaning of words in philosophical contexts depended on their previous history of philosophical use, because there was no history of philosophical use for the earliest philosophers to draw on. When Socrates asked philosophical questions like "what is knowledge?" or "can virtue be taught?" he and his interlocutors were not, and could not be, relying on an antecedent philosophical understanding of words like "knowledge" or "virtue." Moreover the point is not restricted to the very earliest philosophical texts. For example, when Descartes identifies his thinking self as a "mind," he is not using the word "mind" in an already established philosophical sense: in fact he quite self-consciously writes that, before going through the intellectual exercise described in the first two Meditations, he had been "ignorant [of the word's] meaning."[26] And throughout subsequent philosophical history, philosophers have coined new terms ("apperception," "implicature," "rigid designator") or used everyday terms in new philosophical ways ("substance," "intuition," "phenomenal.") A related point is that there are some philosophical problems that we can get quite small children to understand, in spite of their ignorance of the history of philosophy.[27] Six-year-olds can appreciate, for example, skeptical questions about the external world or other minds, or Zeno's paradoxes about motion, even if they lack the conceptual resources for making progress in addressing them.

I want to grant that the view I have presented is not fully generalizable. But it nonetheless has broad applicability, and I think that this is sufficient for it to serve as an answer to the question we are considering. For, at least since Plato, the introduction of new terms or philosophical uses has relied to a large extent on the use of terms with a prior philosophical history. Descartes's new philosophical conception of "mind," even though it is presented with studied naïvety, relies—via its appeal to skepticism about the external world—on an understanding of "knowledge" that is derived in part from Plato's distinction between knowledge and true belief. And even if our everyday understanding of the word "knowledge" is sufficient for appreciating Cartesian doubt, so that we can come to grasp Descartes's concept of a mind from his use of ordinary language alone, his introduction of the concept still requires a great deal of stage-setting. Similarly, Plato is able to get us to understand words like "knowledge" and "virtue" only through an elaborate dialectic in which the meanings emerge through extended discussion. In the case of new technical terms, these are typically introduced by definitions, but the definitions themselves typically use expressions whose meaning in turn depends on historical use. So while we can sometimes, like Plato and Descartes, use words in philosophically meaningful ways without depending on history, it takes a great deal of work to establish these meanings, and as a result these instances of use are few and far between. For the most part, we have to use words whose meanings

[24] I develop this idea in Ginsborg 2021, §2.

[25] Antognazza argues that, for Plato and the early moderns, knowledge was not belief with added conditions (paradigmatically, justified true belief) but a different kind of condition in which the truth is directly perceived and there is "no 'gap' between knower and known (2015, 169); for more discussion, see Ayers and Antognazza 2019. This undermines the view, commonly assumed in debates about the nature of knowledge, that the justified true belief account of knowledge is the "traditional" account.

[26] Descartes 1642, Second Meditation, AT 27

[27] Thanks to Ursula Coope for this observation.

have already been supplied by a prior history of philosophical use, in which our predecessors have done the work of making those words philosophically intelligible.

A fourth objection challenges my assumption that the understanding of philosophical problems depends on a prior grasp of the concepts that are used in formulating those problems. As we saw, Sauer's argument for the irrelevance of history to philosophy turns on the idea that our aim in philosophy is to find solutions to questions like "what is knowledge?" and "how does the human mind work"? I have been proposing a reductio of Sauer's position: without the history of philosophy we cannot so much as understand these questions, since it is only through studying the history of philosophy that we can appreciate what words like "knowledge" and "mind" mean in a philosophical context, and thus to grasp the corresponding concepts. But it might be objected that this over-simplifies the relation between philosophical concepts and philosophical problems.[28] According to an idea suggested by Collingwood and developed by Gadamer, the understanding of any text, including a single sentence, depends on understanding, the question that it is intended to address.[29] As Gadamer puts it, "Someone who wants to understand must ask what lies behind what is said. He must understand it as answering a question to which it is the answer" (1960, 363). This might be thought to extend not just to the understanding of texts, but to understanding quite generally, in such a way that, rather than our grasp of philosophical problems depending on our understanding of the words used to formulate them, we cannot understand these words—or at least, cannot understand them fully—unless we appreciate the problems that drive the formation of the corresponding concepts. On such a line of thought, it is a mistake to think that we can understand words like "mind" and "knowledge" in philosophical contexts prior to identifying corresponding problems, say, about how the mind is related to the body or how knowledge is possible.

While I recognize the force of the idea that we cannot understand, say, philosophical texts without understanding the questions they are intended to address, I do not think that it can be extended to the understanding of individual philosophical terms —at least the level of understanding that we aim for our students to attain, or that we ourselves have in areas in which we are not experts.[30] It is true that the understanding of philosophical terms is often closely connected with the understanding of philosophical problems involving those terms: for example, we might come to grasp the meaning of the term "knowledge" as it is used in philosophical contexts by being introduced to the question of how knowledge is different from true belief. But this need not always be the case. We can acquire some understanding of the term "mind" as used by Descartes before coming to recognize any philosophical problems about the nature of mind, or about other minds, or about how mind and body are related.[31] And it is hard to see how, in general, we could come to understand philosophical problems without some prior understanding of the vocabulary used to state them. But even if it is granted that the understanding of philosophical terms depends on an understanding of the questions or problems in which they figure, or more generally of the questions or problems that motivated the philosophers who used those terms, that does not weaken the argument I have offered for why philosophy needs the history of philosophy. If anything, it strengthens it. For, as both Collingwood and Gadamer point out, seeking to understand the questions that motivated philosophical texts is essentially a historical venture.

[28]Ursula Renz raised this question in discussion; Jessica Leech made the related point that sometimes philosophical concepts are generated by problems, as in the case of Kant's concept of a noumenon, which has its origin in a problem that the faculty of reason sets for itself.

[29]See Collingwood 1939, 31ff, and Gadamer 1990, 352. For a helpful sketch, and defence, of Gadamer's view, see Renz 2018, §§4–5.

[30]This distinction—between the understanding of texts and the understanding of the words that figure in those texts—can be invoked to address another possible objection, raised in discussion by Bernhard Thöle. My account assumes a kind of continuity of understanding from one philosopher to another, so that (say) Spinoza understands expressions like "mind" and "substance" in something like Descartes' sense, even though he ascribes very different properties to minds and substance(s). But it might be objected that philosophers are prone to misunderstanding their predecessors, sometimes in quite dramatic ways. To this I would reply that there is a difference betweeen misunderstanding someone's views and misunderstanding their words. The difference is illustrated by Wittgenstein: "'After he had said this, he left her as he did the day before."– Do I understand this sentence?" (2009, §525). Wittgenstein replies that I do not know what the sentence is about, but I still understand it in the sense that I know how it might be used. Philosophers can fail to understand one another in the first way and still understand one another in the second.

[31]Perhaps this example mis-states the kind of problem on whose recognition grasp of the concept *mind* depends. A better example, perhaps more in the spirit of Collingwood and Gadamer, might be the relation between Descartes's concept of mind and the problems motivating the views of the *Meditations*, including that of providing philosophical foundations for the "new science" and showing that it can be reconciled with religion. But in that case the point does not constitute an objection to my assumption that understanding questions requires prior grasp of the concepts that figure in those very questions.

A final point that might be made by way of objection is that my view is fundamentally conservative.[32] It implies that, in studying the history of philosophy, we must focus to a large extent on the traditional male-dominated Western canon, since it is the canonical great philosophers who have largely determined the meanings of present-day philosophical language. Here, as with the third objection, I want to concede the point. At least given the rationale for the history of philosophy that is my primary focus in this paper, we do need to preserve and to keep teaching and studying the canon. The three reasons for the importance of the history of philosophy that I considered in section 2 do not have this conservative implication: they all give us reasons for going outside the traditional canon or, better, broadening the canon so that it comes to include previously neglected figures whose work deserves attention. But as far as the justification now under discussion is concerned, our emphasis has to be primarily on the philosophers whose works have traditionally been taken as exemplary. For we are interested in them, from the point of view of this justification, precisely to the extent that they offer generally accepted paradigms of how philosophical terms, or ordinary terms in philosophical contexts, can or should be used. This complicates questions about how we design syllabi or allocate our research time, since our resources are limited and we have to weigh competing demands on them. But if my justification for history is correct, we cannot focus on previously neglected figures at the cost of abandoning the traditional canon entirely, since that would jeopardize our—and our students'—understanding of the philosophical terms and concepts on which we rely as a fundamental condition of our work.

In insisting on the need for a canon, I am in partial agreement with Richard Rorty, Rorty thinks that we need a canon to constitute ourselves as part of an intellectual community across time (1984, 73). Relatedly, he thinks, we need the canon to tell us what philosophy is, or what counts as a philosophical question (1984, 58–61). I am sympathetic to both these points. However, and this represents a point of divergence, Rorty also says that we need canons because "we cannot get along without heroes." As he goes on to put it: "We need mountain peaks to look up towards. We need to tell ourselves detailed stories about the mighty dead in order to make our hopes of surpassing them concrete" (1984, 73). According to the justification I have been giving, we do not need the canon to provide mountain peaks for us to aspire to, but we do need it to provide something more modest: landmarks or points of orientation with respect to which we can fix the meaning of our philosophical terms. Or, to put the point in still more modest terms: we need it to provide what Wittgenstein calls "rough ground," so that our philosophical thinking and speaking does not skate on frictionless ice where there are no constraints on how we use our words.[33]

5 | CONCLUDING REMARK

I conclude by comparing my view with that expressed in a famous quotation from Wilfrid Sellars. Sellars writes that "[t]he history of philosophy is the *lingua franca* which makes communication between philosophers, at least of different points of view, possible."[34] On the face of it, what Sellars has in mind is the kind of explicit appeal to historical works that he himself makes in *Science and Metaphysics*, where, as he puts it, he "build[s] [his] discussion of contemporary issues on a foundation of Kant exegesis and commentary," thus using Kant as a "means of communication."[35] I am sympathetic to this defence of history, but my approach goes beyond it in two significant respects. First, the history of philosophy makes communication possible not just because it provides explicit points of reference for explaining our own philosophical views, but because it underpins our use of philosophical language generally. Even

[32]Thanks to Andreja Novakovic for raising this point.

[33]"We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!" (Wittgenstein 2009, §107). Wittgenstein is here talking about the need to attend to the everyday use of language in order to make sense of meaning and understanding, but the metaphor is a useful one in the present context as well.

[34]Sellars 1968, 1. Sauer dismisses this passage as "an empirical conjecture that seems to be plainly false," claiming that "there is plenty of ahistorical philosophy" and that it is "surely not" the case that "all of it [is] empty, blind or dumb" (2022, 10). But this fails to recognize that even philosophy which does not explicitly refer to historical figures is not "philosophy without the history of philosophy" since—at least if its practitioners have had a conventional philosophical training—it will be informed by their knowledge of history.

[35]Sellars 1968, 1.

when we do not explicitly bring historical figures into our discussions, we rely on them implicitly to give content to the vocabulary we use. Second, whereas a *lingua franca* is very often a second language, used for communication but not necessarily in our own thinking, the history of philosophy, on my view, is needed not only for communicating philosophical ideas, but for entertaining them in the first place. It is not just that the history of philosophy gives us a way of conveying our philosophical views to others and of understanding their views in turn, it is that—in large part—familiarity with history is required if we are to understand even our own views, or indeed the questions which those views are supposed to address.[36] To a large extent, then, we need the history of philosophy in order to be able to think philosophically at all. In proposing, then, that the history of philosophy is a source of meaning — specifically the meaning of our philosophical terms — I am also proposing that it is a source of concepts. Although we may not always recognize it, our philosophical thinking gets its shape and structure from our familiarity—direct or indirect—with the historical texts from which we have derived our philosophical vocabulary.[37]

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[36]Compare this passage from Rée: "Members of an inward-looking intellectual community … may understand one another well enough without conscious use of … historical knowledge. They may be as unware of it as of the air they breathe. But they need only try communicating with outsiders to realise that they depend on it implicitly. Even an isolated individual who only wanted to work out his own ideas for himself would need such historical knowledge: identifying one's own ideas involves most of the same problems as identifying other people's" (Rée 1978, 30). Although Rée's view of the importance of the history of philosophy differs from mine, this passage suggests both of the points I have just made in contrasting my view with that of Sellars.

[37]I am grateful for the invitation to deliver the Mark Sacks Lecture in Berlin in 2024, and for the very illuminating discussions associated with that event. I presented an earlier, and more abbreviated, version of the same material at the 2023 Hegel Congress in Stuttgart; that version is forthcoming in the *Proceedings* of that conference, under the title "The Importance of History to Philosophical Methodology." The paper owes its origin to a conversation in the late 1970s with Adam Stephenson, who, I believe, first suggested to me the idea that the history of philosophy is necessary for the understanding of philosophical language. I am indebted, for further helpful conversation and discussion, to Olivia Bailey, Janet Broughton, Tim Clarke, Ursula Coope, Béatrice Longuenesse, John MacFarlane, Seana Shiffrin, and Daniel Warren, as well as to interlocutors in Stuttgart and Berlin, in particular Matthew Boyle, Dina Emundts, Jessica Leech, Wayne Martin, Andreja Novakovic, Beate Roessler, Tobias Rosefeldt, Joseph Schear, and Bernhard Thöle. I am especially grateful to Ursula Renz for her detailed comments on the penultimate version.

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