

Why Study the History of Philosophy?

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OVERVIEW

- I. Two Concepts of Philosophy
- II. Why Study Its History: Some Standard Reasons
- III. The Real Reasons

I. Two Concepts of Philosophy

- I'd like to begin with a question:
When did you last notice two people now working in philosophy who understood each another's views and arguments?
- Answer: Very likely when you last noticed two who agreed about the relevant views—and arguments use to support them.
So how about two who *don't* thus agree:
When did you see two such people who nonetheless understood each other well?

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- This isn't because philosophy is abstract and often technical and complicated; such epidemic mutual misunderstanding is strikingly rare in mathematics and physics.
- How about in the (other) humanities?
Mutual misunderstanding isn't all that rare in literature, music, and the arts.
Professors and critics often just stick to their own views—which often seem all but incommensurable with those of others—and mainly fight for those views rather than foster mutual comprehension.
- Such observations may tempt us to accept librarians' and deans' placing philosophy among the humanities, rather than as a distinctively theoretical discipline.

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- The resemblance to the humanities figures also in the significant place historical work has in our field. That's characteristic of the humanities, not at all of the sciences.
- Postmodernism capitalizes on this, arguing that philosophical work is best seen as deconstruction or an ongoing conversation, and as not, despite its pretensions, seeking to get at the truth about things.
- That picture does no justice to philosophy, which plainly does aim at solving problems. But there's yet another resemblance to the humanities: Past philosophers built big systems, which may suggest perspectives and ways of looking at reality—perhaps not unlike the way great works of art often do.

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- So the history of such systems may seem like a history of ways of looking at things—again on analogy with the humanities. It offers alternate routes to understanding and insight about the nature of reality.
- But the system builders themselves plainly aimed at getting things right—getting at the truth—so one could read just their books and not bother with any alternatives. Aristotle, Hume, Kant, and Hegel all argued that their predecessors were just wrong.
- Past work in science is incorporated (if true) or discarded (if not). So why is there any distinctively philosophical role for systems that do not capture the truth—apart from their being part of our cultural heritage?

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- Perhaps the current view of philosophy as one of the humanities and its history as significant distorts its nature, seeing it just as providing insight and understanding—in contrast with the (real) sciences, which do get at the truth about things.
- The sciences theorize about the nature of things. Science is truth seeking, the arts interpretative. Where does philosophy fit?
- Philosophy is truth seeking, but finds its history significant—and not a mere adjunct. What role does that history play? And how to reconcile philosophy's problem-solving nature with the emphasis on its history? I'll mainly discuss the first question, saying a bit about the second at the very end.

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- The standard reasons are unconvincing.
- Historical work is occasionally suggestive—perhaps nowhere more than Aristotle on ethics, but also Brentano for Chisholm and Spinoza for Hampshire. But that's rare.
- Past work may be seen as a cautionary list of mistakes not to make; but past mistakes are seldom relevant to contemporary work.
- Past philosophers often argued for their own view by showing how it undermined those of their predecessors. But now that's mainly done with our contemporaries—who after all can talk back!

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- It's often said that we can understand today's issues only by seeing their origin. But issues must be framed ahistorically. And if issues do figure only in a historical context, why take them seriously?
- In that spirit, historical work is often used as a ramp to get students into the issues. But that's typically done with snippets—and simplifications that often distort the texts; it's mainly strawmen, not history.
- A variation: We understand current issues only if we see them as problematic, which requires historical context. But something seems puzzling if we lack a solution—not because of how it arose. And past issues rarely commensurate with current versions.

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- Historical work offers views and arguments we might otherwise not consider. But older views seldom commensurate with our own.
- Historical work provides touchstones—not just shortcuts, but ostensibly neutral points of common currency, e.g., Hume on causation. But these are seldom neutral—and rarely require any historical study.
- Perhaps as 19th-century science came to occupy turf formerly ruled by philosophy, philosophy retreated from Kant's "secure path of a science" (Bvii) to the safety of the humanities, encouraged by an Hegelian historicism. But that sacrifices philosophy's truth-seeking, problem-solving character to explain the role of its history.

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- The standard reasons not only are pretty unconvincing; they all have an air of ad hoc rationalization. And that suggests something deeper is going on, not revealed by these appeals to superficial usefulness. What might that be?
- The epidemic failure in philosophy of mutual understanding suggests an answer.
- How do we understand what anybody says? We have nothing to go on but that person's words, which we must construe in the best possible way. But how?

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- Sometimes the best we can do results in words that don't apply to things we understand, sentences we see as untrue, and questionable inferences. Then we just don't understand the other person's words.
- Understanding requires casting others' words so that they referentially match our own, result in sentences we see as true often enough to frame our understanding of other, puzzling sentences, and result in inferences that seem compelling to us. These forms of charity are unavoidable.
- But charity has all three forms—which may pull in incompatible directions. So we must strike a balance, and there needn't be one that's best—a unique best interpretation.

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- But things are even worse. Words used in philosophy don't have fixed applications. And there's divergence about background assumptions and about which inferences are compelling. So the three forms of charity rarely yield straightforward results.
- To figure out what words apply to, what background beliefs are true, and what inferences valid, we must settle relevant philosophical issues. We can't interpret others' work without views, however provisional, on the relevant matters.
- So doing anything in history of philosophy requires working on philosophical issues—it's just that the issues arise in the context of interpreting texts.

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- We can see the role of charity in current debate. Commentators often seem almost deliberately to misunderstand those they discuss. That's seldom bad faith so much as misconstruals due to differences about what words refer to, what's true, and what inferences are compelling. Still, it's often hard or impossible to get past that.
- Contemporary commentary often proceeds a few sentences at a time. Historical texts, by structure, require interpreting things in the context of complex systems.
- That makes things harder, since one must take into account the connections among issues that figure in interpreting the text. But there's a big compensatory payoff.

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- For one thing, we must grapple with how issues raised in the text hang together.
- Far more important, because the texts are so systematic, the philosophical issues one needs to settle for charitable interpretation will themselves exhibit rich systematic interrelations. Construing here requires work on systematically connected issues.
- So serious historical work in philosophy calls for doing enough systematic work on interconnected philosophical issues to have relevant views about what's true and what inferences are compelling. Interpreting systematic historical texts requires systematic background thinking of one's own about philosophical issues.

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- In conclusion, a few global remarks. Dewey spoke of "those astounding differences of philosophic belief that startle the beginner and that become the plaything of the expert." He diagnosed this as due to theoretical "[c]hoice that is disguised or denied"—i.e., undisclosed, optional assumptions.
- Dewey urged that we see each choice as a theoretical "experiment to be tried on its merits and tested by its results"—i.e., its theoretical payoff in explaining and describing things (*All Exp. & Nat.*, 30).
- The history of philosophy does suggest this unsettling multiplicity of incommensurate systems that one can jump into at will.

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- Dewey's seemingly irresolvable multiplicity of systems occur only in the history of philosophy. Current oppositions answer and yield to some extent to argument.
- But the historical multiplicity of systems can be useful. Systems often oppose one another due to hidden shared assumptions, which charitable interpreting can reveal. And that in turn can suggest ways to get past the doctrines those systems embody to arrive at stable positions on the issues.
- By noting the interplay among the systems themselves, which charitable interpretation makes salient, we can hope to work toward transcending the systems themselves. So studying them is useful.

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- Charitable interpreting is essential to work in the history of philosophy, as is attention to systematic connections among issues one must work on to do the relevant charitable interpreting.
- That interpretative aspect of the history of philosophy recalls the interpreting essential to all the standard humanities. Because its history is inextricably tied to work on substantive issues in philosophy itself, there is an aspect of philosophy that genuinely resembles the humanities.
- But that fits comfortably within picture of philosophy as a truth-seeking discipline. As Plato noted, philosophy is not on a par with the arts.

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