

Allen W. Wood and Songsuk Susan Hahn, eds.

The Cambridge History of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century (1790-1870).

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It is often said about a book that ‘it will become a standard reference’ for people working in a philosophical field of study. Exempting the real classics of philosophy, Wood and Hahn’s *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century* (hereafter ‘CHPNC’) is one of those rare cases for which that saying actually holds. Spectacular in its form and content, this massive volume of almost a thousand pages covers various aspects of the development of European philosophy in the period from 1790 to 1870. There are twenty-eight essays in total, all written by top-notch scholars (Pippin, Pinkard, Horstmann, Forster, Guyer, Skorupski, Beiser, Neuhausser, to mention but a few), organized thematically in eight parts: (i) Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century (which focuses on the reactions to Kant’s theoretical philosophy), (ii) Logic and Mathematics, (iii) Nature (which covers both philosophy of nature and developments in the natural sciences), (iv) Mind, Language, and Culture (with essays on the development of psychology and the human sciences as well as essays on philosophy of language and aesthetics) (v) Ethics (which discusses the problem of autonomy and the self as the basis of morality, the moral significance of the social good, moral epistemology, and antimoralism) (vi) Religion, (vii) Society (which focuses on the various conceptions of society, political economy, natural right, the nation-state, social dissatisfaction and social change), and (viii) History (which discusses conceptions of the method of historians, philosophy of history and the historiography of philosophy). The essays are supplemented by a fifty-page bibliography, a thirty-five-page index, and an introduction by Allen Wood.

What makes the book so valuable is the amazingly rich information each essay/part provides in the compressed space that has been allocated to it. A plethora of names and theses parade before the reader’s eyes, covering thereby an admirably wide range of interconnected ideas (but also societal, political, and literary events) within a certain thematic *Konstellation*. In his twenty-page essay on psychology, for example, Gary Hatfield refers to Lotze, Fechner, Helmholtz, Wundt, Spencer, Darwin, Aristotle, Descartes, Moleschott, Berkeley, Hume, Spinoza, Reid, Condillac, Hartley, Bonnet, Priestley, Herbart, and many more. This practice is the norm in the volume; its significance is that it turns the book into an ideal springboard for further study. The novice interested in researching how psychology developed during the 19th century will find the perfect beginner’s guide in Hatfield’s essay; the student who wants to make a start in her investigation of the problem of language in 19th-century philosophy will receive flawless direction from Michael Forster’s erudite essay on that subject; and there is another essay

or group of essays suitable for the one who is only now beginning his studies on the logic and mathematics or philosophy of nature or moral and political philosophy (and so on) of the 19th century. The fact that so many of CHPNC's essays can perform this function of guidance (and do this excellently) makes the volume as a whole a truly invaluable tool (a 'standard reference') for anyone studying or researching the enormously complex 19th-century philosophical landscape.

Yet there is a problem in this particular practice as well, for the attempt to make the provided information as rich as it can be has quite often escalated into the provision of merely encyclopaedic knowledge. Take for example Jeremy Heis's essay on logic or Philippe Huneman's essay on the natural sciences, where every paragraph introduces at least one new name and/or thesis. The first refers to Kant, Frege, Leibniz, Lambert, Ploucquet, De Morgan, Hamilton, Maimon, Hegel, Whately, Hedge, Krug, Esser, Mansel, Mill, Whewell, Lagrange, Peacock, Gregory, Peirce, Boole, Sigwart, and many, many more, boasting 252 footnotes in the space of thirty-two pages. The second refers to Whewell, Mill, Comte, Spencer, Dilthey, Schopenhauer, Darwin, Maxwell, Lagrange, Faraday, Mendel, Lyell, Hegel, Schelling, Lamarck, Burdach, Treviranus, Blumenbach, Girtanner, Meckel and many others in the space of thirty. Evidently, such excessive litanies of names and the endless following of one thesis after another would limit the philosophical argument – and it does. There are times when one has the feeling that there is a fierce competition among the authors about who will refer to most names or to the least known ones. As the biologist gains pleasure from discovering a hitherto unknown species of plant or animal life, so it would seem that the historian of philosophy gains pleasure from bringing to scholarly attention a philosophical idea (and the philosopher who uttered it) that as yet has remained hidden. This, of course, is quite legitimate. Arguably, however, the simple reference to this idea, without the company of its interpretation and evaluation, and its simple listing amidst a myriad of other ideas, does it great injustice.

Not all essays in the volume have this excessively encyclopaedic character. Robert Pippin's thoughtful essay on 'the Kantian aftermath'—the first essay of CHPNC—discusses the dualisms upon which Kant's theoretical philosophy is founded and the attempt of the post-Kantians to unify them into one source. Despite the fact that, as the subsequent essays show, tens of thinkers got involved in the discussion, Pippin follows a simple strategy: he first gives the basics of Kantian theoretical philosophy and then focuses on the reactions of "the major players in the narrative" (34), to wit, the three great German idealists (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel). This is a wise historiographical choice, for only in this way could Pippin develop decently some arguments in the space of twenty-five pages and thereby force the reader to *reflect*—the element that is missing from the 'encyclopaedic' essays. Alexander Rueger follows roughly the same strategy in his brilliant essay on the philosophical 'conceptions of the natural world' (*Naturphilosophie*) in the period under discussion. Rueger begins by giving a detailed account of Kant's metaphysics of nature, then passes on to Schelling's influential attempt to complete this metaphysics by establishing a unitary basis for it, and concludes with a presentation of three

positions that emanated from Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*: scientific materialism (Moleschott, Büchner, Czolbe), dialectical materialism (Engels), and spiritualist monism (Lotze). As with Pippin's essay, the simple format allows Rueger to devote much more space to philosophical argument than the encyclopaedic essays do. But, as I have already pointed out, Pippin's and Rueger's essays are not the norm in the volume.

Another feature of CHPNC that might, for some, have negative connotations—or, at least, not be as innocent or positive as one may think—is the fact that it has not been produced singlehandedly, that it has been composed out of the contributions of many scholars. It certainly adds to the value of the volume that its final essay (the second written by Forster) deals exactly with the issue of writing history of philosophy, introducing thus a kind of self-reflection into it. But its author, unfortunately, chooses not to associate CHPNC's own format with his discussion of the 19th-century thinkers' practices of writing history of philosophy. In particular, it is of immense interest that none of the 19th-century histories of philosophy Forster mentions—and I do think he mentions all of them—had been the product of collaborative activity; each was written by a single author. (On page 868 Forster writes: “Also noteworthy in this connection is F. Überweg (*et al.*), *Outline of the History of Philosophy* (1862–1866), a frequently republished and expanded *collaborative* [my emphasis] work that aspires to be a neutral handbook of the history of philosophy ...” This is misleading, as Überweg's *Grundriß der Geschichte der Philosophie* was not *originally* a collaborative work; it became so only after 1924, while its original author already died in 1871.) Of course, there may be nothing philosophically valuable in addressing this issue: it may be the case that no 19th-century historian of philosophy ever thought the possibility of collaborating with one or more of his peers. Yet it may be the case that to write history of philosophy singlehandedly was considered a superior choice.

Even though only further research can determine the truth regarding that particular matter, the reader of CHPNC would expect that either Forster (given that he is the one who discusses the very idea of writing history of philosophy) or the editors would give a clear response to the question of why CHPNC had to have the format it has. What are the advantages of the history of philosophy's being the result of collaborative work? Surely, the answer is not at all obvious or self-evident. Recall that Descartes, for example, strongly believed that in some epistemic contexts collaborative work is harmful (*Discourse on the Method*, in Cottingham, Stoothoff, & Murdoch, eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I, Cambridge University Press 1985, 116, 117 and 119). I for one can think of no clear-cut advantage besides that ‘collaborative’ writing produces history of philosophy *much faster* than ‘lone’ writing does. But does this suffice for opting for this format of writing history of philosophy? Maybe it does, considering the enormous amount of data and interpretations a historian of philosophy nowadays has at her disposal. Maybe, that is, it is no longer possible within a lifetime for a single person to study all that needs to be studied in order to write history of philosophy. Even so, however, the method of writing history of philosophy collaboratively can become the obvious choice only

when we, firstly, determine what we lose by not writing history of philosophy singlehandedly and, secondly, decide that this is *not* something philosophically essential, something we should not have lost. Unfortunately neither Forster (in the final essay) nor Wood (in the introduction) reflects on this absolutely crucial matter.

One thing that is undoubtedly lost in the passage from ‘lone’ writing to ‘collaborative’ writing of history of philosophy is the development of this history in terms of certain *guiding* philosophical principles. Indeed, by reading CHPNC one has the feeling that each author has his or her own peculiar programme to fulfil, that with each essay the narrative begins anew and follows an altogether different path, and that what matters most is the ‘neutral’ exposition of the ‘facts’, not the disclosure of a certain fundamental principle that guides the whole movement of philosophical ideas. In his extremely important essay, Forster seems to confirm the observation that 19th-century thinkers conceived of or evaluated history of philosophy in terms of certain fundamental philosophical principles: Kant employed the principle that “the history of the discipline had been a progression from recurring cycles of rationalism versus empiricism to their eventual [synthesis] in his own critical philosophy” (867); Hegel understood the history of philosophy as the process of logical being’s self-externalization and self-comprehension; Schlegel saw this history as a regression from the perfection of the Greeks (870); and Comte, Lewes, Marx, Nietzsche, and Gruppe used their own peculiar fundamental philosophical principles in order to understand and evaluate the history of philosophy. The author is sometimes quite critical of these principles; but the *content* of each principle is not the most significant philosophical problem here (i.e., this is not what is most significant in the context of a discussion about the very notion of writing history of philosophy). The problem, rather, is whether one’s writing history of philosophy *without* one’s being guided by a certain philosophical principle (or by a group of interconnected philosophical principles) has any *philosophical* value.

The argument against there being a philosophically valuable history of philosophy that is not guided by a philosophical principle is that history of philosophy is a philosophical discipline and as such its purpose is to express the truth; but the various stages of history of philosophy cannot be evaluated in terms of truth unless there is a criterion of truth. The guiding philosophical principle is exactly that criterion of truth. Without there being such a criterion, namely, a guiding philosophical principle, history of philosophy is reduced to a mere ‘encyclopaedia’ (a parade of names and theses). Whatever the merits of this argument, it should be noted that not a single one of the authors of CHPNC seems to conceive of his or her discussion as a search for the truth. The aim, rather, seems to be merely to give simple (or even ‘synthetic’) descriptions of the various philosophical positions of the period and to do so in a ‘neutral’, ‘dispassionate’ manner. In his discussion of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, Forster refers approvingly to his “vitally important interpretive principle” that “[one should keep] the question of the author’s meaning sharply separate from the question of its truth” (880). Hegel, for one—the quintessential 19th-century historian of philosophy—would find this position of Schleiermacher’s nonsensical. But I myself

do not take anyone's side here; I simply point out the problem (to wit, 'is a purely 'encyclopaedic' history of philosophy philosophical valuable?').

Take, for example, the three essays that comprise the section on religion (by Van Harvey, Stephen Crites, and James Livingston). They are all excellently written and arranged in an apparently systematic order: Harvey gives us a lively discussion of 'the challenges to religion in nineteenth century', Crites presents 'three types of speculative religion', and Livingston describes the positions of the various 'defenders of traditional religion'. But going through the three chapters, the reader finds herself simply jumping from one conception of religion to the next and thereby merely becoming acquainted with the basics of an array of 19th-century theories about religion. We learn in some (sometimes greater, sometimes lesser) detail what Kant, Strauss, Schleiermacher, Feuerbach, Marx, Newman, Mansel, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Coleridge, Schelling, Hegel, Hamann, Bonald, Bautain, Bushnell, de Chateaubriand, Drey, Möhler, Kierkegaard, Baur, Biedermann, and Jacobi thought (philosophically) about religion. But this is all we learn: there is no critical discussion of these positions and even less an attempt to adjudicate between them. The reader has the feeling that the authors find it 'politically incorrect' to take sides in a discussion that is part of a 'history of philosophy'. In this, however, there looms the grave danger of the reader thinking that the history of philosophy is nothing but an aggregate of narratives – an aggregate that has been put together not in terms of the disclosure (or hiding) of truth, but rather simply in terms of an empirical actuality (to wit, the fact that all these theoretical positions emerged in time). Surely, this is quite depressing: why should anyone be interested in hearing what the expositor of all these philosophers (i.e., the historian of philosophy) has to say if she does not discuss them with regards to the question of whether they are true or not? The question of truth being absent, the history of philosophy, methinks, appears to be, at the end of the day, no different from an encyclopaedia.

In conclusion, CHPNC is a monumental scholarly achievement and deserves to be wholeheartedly applauded for the amazingly rich information it offers the student of 19th-century philosophy. The two editors have done a brilliant job in organizing a massive amount of material, and the authors of the twenty-eight essays have, with absolutely no exception, produced first-rate results. I have raised two critical points: first, no philosophical reflection on the 'collaborative' character of the project is included in the volume; second, all texts are developed in a descriptive register, being almost totally devoid of critical or evaluative discussion (the most one finds are a few 'comparative' remarks). This latter point justifies my characterization of most of the essays as having an 'encyclopaedic' nature. I have insinuated that the second point follows from the first: a 'collaborative' history of philosophy has an inherent tendency to be more descriptive than critical or constructive. But no case at all has been made for this claim. It should be strongly emphasized that it is not my intention to accuse the authors of any wrongdoing. I believe it was the very concept of the project as a whole that obliged them to write the way they did. Simply, the emphasis has been laid on giving as much information as possible,

on ‘illuminating’ or ‘clarifying’ the phenomena (to wit, the various theories), not on promoting the truth of the subject-matter: in the Preface, Wood writes that the volume “attempts to provide a *comprehensive* account of philosophy during the period it covers” (xi, my emphasis). This—especially in conjunction with the fact that each author had only limited space at his/her disposal—has the advantage of turning the book into ‘a standard reference’ for anyone entering a philosophical field of study that relates to the 19th century; but it also has the disadvantage of turning it into a treatise of more or less ‘encyclopaedic’ character, a mere play of narratives.

Ioannis Trisokkas

Institute for Advanced Study, New Europe College, Bucharest
Open University of Cyprus