

Mogens Laerke, Justin Smith, and Eric Schliesser (eds.)

Philosophy and its History: Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy.

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Three decades ago Richard Rorty, Quentin Skinner, and Jerome Schneewind published *Philosophy in History: Essays in the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press 1984), a volume that has since remained unrivaled in the breadth and depth of its theorizing about its subject. Questions of method and reception-history indeed resurfaced after the turn of the millennium, but advanced thinking on these topics did not initially converge into a single medium. The most significant publication was probably Schneewind's collection of contextualist manifestos, *Teaching New Histories of Philosophy* (Princeton University Press 2004). That work, however, summarizes the achievements of a passing generation more than it points forward to new methodological or theoretical directions. The volume under review distinguishes itself from its predecessor on this point and others. In *Philosophy and Its History*, Laerke, Smith, and Schliesser have presented the first truly outstanding work on this subject since the landmark volume by Rorty and Skinner.

The subtitle (*Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy*) indicates the volume's chief limitation, by suggesting (wrongly) that the contributions are of concern mainly to specialists in a given historical era. Demarcation of temporal scope is, to be sure, an ineliminable aspect of history, but this volume is not a history *per se*. More importantly, the use of a shopworn period-marker such as 'early modern' would seem to be beneath the standards of a collection that promises, and delivers, such an intense set of reflections on method and reception. The editors compensate for this titular lapse by scare-quoting the expression in their Introduction (4). Otherwise there is very little about this volume that should appeal more to 'early modernists' than to other historians or theorists.

In the Introduction the editors seek also to ally themselves with positions expressed in Schneewind's 2004 volume, which I will refer to collectively as New Contextualism. This movement is represented by Daniel Garber among early modernists, but it has not been limited to that historical period. Roughly speaking, a New Contextualist is an historian who, in the first place, is suspicious of 'appropriationism', or any attempt to "mine past philosophy for timelessly good arguments" (3) in hopes of making a contribution to current philosophy. These historians thus emphasize the autonomy of the history of philosophy in regard to contemporary philosophy. But they are equally suspicious of the proto-contextualist arguments put forth in the 1960's Quentin Skinner, who insisted that the intention of the author is the first and last standard of interpretation.

The principal theoretical task for such an historian is to define some sense of 'context' without appealing to something elusive and inscrutable such as 'what the author meant', or even to Skinner's awkward and equally inscrutable 'what the author could be brought to accept as a description of what

she meant'. The first essay in the volume undertakes just this task. Mogen Laerke leads the way with his excellent 'The Anthropological Analogy and the Constitution of Historical Perspectivism'. He defends a sense of subdisciplinary autonomy by distinguishing absolutely, without recourse to non-historical considerations, between *philosophical truth* and *historical meaning*. Historians of philosophy, qua historians, take the latter as their sole object. But since Laerke recognizes the shortcomings of Skinner's arguments, he needs a concept of 'true historical meaning' that makes no appeal to intention. This he defines as "the sum of actually immanent or contextually internal perspectives on that past philosophical text" (23). Contextualism in this key thus usefully discards the old assumption that individual persons or authors present the primary subject matters of interpretation.

Historiography on Laerke's view is *actualist*: it has to do exclusively with the real course of past events. It would be otiose, then, to imagine how Locke might reply to Kant, given that the former died before the latter was born. But this actualism is also both *perspectivist* and *pluralist*, and Laerke allows that there are many contexts 'immanent' to a given text (e.g., the Danish reception of the *Critique of Pure Reason* will differ from the Prussian reception), each of which will emphasize different interpretive premises. What Laerke lacks, however, is a principle for distinguishing immanent, internal contexts from external ones. Kant's contemporary readers at Prussian universities provide one immanent context, with perhaps the young seminarians at Tübingen providing a second. Do Parisians from the war era inhabit a context external to the text? How about the Pittsburgh philosophers of the 1950's and 1960's? Questions of this sort pose a challenge to Laerke's theory, to whatever extent he wishes to present an *apologia* for conventionally contextualist histories without leaving the door open to 'assimilationist' history.

Justin Smith's 'History of Philosophy as Past and as Process' offers a different but equally compelling methodological direction: whereas Laerke urges historians to behave like anthropologists, immersing ourselves in the customs and language of a foreign people, Schliesser uses archeology and material histories as his driving metaphors. A scientist on a dig would not, we presume, assess the value of an ancient jug by whether it holds water. Just the same, historians of philosophy should not be concerned with whether an old argument appears valid by contemporary standards. The assumption here is that there is much philosophy to be learned by ignoring what appears relevant to us, including just how contingent our notion of 'philosophy' is. In his more inspired moments Schliesser offers a number of examples or 'case studies' (42-47) that urge historians to go beyond merely written documentation. We can, in the case of seventeenth-century philosophy, reconstruct laboratory experiments, research the history of microscopy, and engage in other activities that bring us closer, in terms of method, to evolutionary biologists or climate scientists. The idea here is that historians of philosophy, after the proposed 'processualist turn', will study aspects of material culture in 'real historical time' as opposed to projecting abstracted arguments into the 'mythological time' of general historiography (in which we naively oppose Locke to Kant, or Descartes to Moore).

The two remaining essays on historiographical method are Koen Vermeir's 'Philosophy and

Genealogy: Ways of Writing History of Philosophy’ and Ursula Goldenbaum’s ‘Understanding the Argument through Then-Current Public Debates or My Detective Method of History of Philosophy’. Vermeir defends a genealogical approach to history, arguing that this defends autonomy while also preserving a sense of relevance. A genealogy is indeed oriented to the trace-history of present phenomena, so that a practitioner of this method more directly confronts our colleagues in contemporary philosophy than does, for instance, a perspectivist on Laerke’s model or a processualist on Schliesser’s. Goldenbaum presents an anti-theoretical account of method, one that nonetheless follows actualist and perspectivist principles similar to those Laerke defends.

The contributions by Joanne Waugh and Roger Ariew (‘The Contingency of Philosophical Problems’) and Leo Catana (‘Philosophical Problems in the History of Philosophy’) provide some much-needed investigations into the concept of a problem. The concern that drives these essays is that the isolation of historiographic entities of this sort, such as the ‘problem of induction’, the ‘problem of the external world,’ etc., places the objects of philosophizing into a mythical time that allows for anachronistic comparisons between Descartes and Moore, or Hume and Russell, etc. Not only are the so-called problems of philosophy contingent products of contingent histories, but the very notion of a problem in the first place is suspect. Roughly speaking, a problem is a purported abstract entity removed from real historical circumstances and projected into an otherwise unquestioned ahistorical scheme.

Delphine Kolesnik-Antoine (‘Is the History of Philosophy a Family Affair? The Examples of Malebranche and Locke in the Cousinian School’) offers the volume’s lone extended foray into the history of histories of philosophy. Her essay probably warrants monographic treatment, but even the short form permits her an instructive review of how, in early nineteenth-century France, philosophical lineages such as ‘Descartes to Locke’ were retrospectively constructed. Anyone interested in the tradition of textbook histories or general histories of philosophy will find countless nuggets among her findings.

The most polemical part of the volume includes in a pair of essays by Eric Schliesser (‘Philosophical Prophecy’) and Michael Della Rocca (‘The Taming of Philosophy’), who both take aim at common narratives of the history of analytic philosophy. Della Rocca’s sketch of what he calls The Method of Intuitions is particularly successful, as is his argument that this method has encouraged a disturbingly conservative approach to our discipline. Schliesser is somewhat more sympathetic to the analytic tradition, to the extent that he seeks for it an alternative history oriented towards a few comments by Moritz Schlick.

Philosophy and Its History includes also valuable contributions by Yitzhak Melamed, Julie Klein, Tad Schmalz, and others. The volume contains a wealth of perspective on method, and offers many suggestions for further historical study. It will be of interest to any historian of philosophy, and should become a classic on methodologies in the history of philosophy.

Kevin J. Harrelson
Ball State University