

22/7/14

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*Rachel Barney*

*Revised from version delivered at Central APA 2012*

### Why Study the History of Philosophy?

I'm not sure my practice as a historian of philosophy has enabled me to answer this question; but my professional training *has* taught me how to turn one question into six, so that's what I'll begin by doing. As you can see from the handout, the first point is that there are really two different kinds of question lurking here: a descriptive or explanatory one, asking why it is that people in fact study the history of philosophy, and a normative one, asking why they should. This latter is what I've termed an invitation to *protreptic*: the ancient philosophical genre, practiced by Aristotle for instance, which explains why the philosophical way of life is also the life of virtue and happiness. I don't know that anyone has ever quite claimed that for doing the *history* of philosophy, but 'protreptic' still seems a fair term to use for what this question invites -- an invitation which, I fear, I'm largely going to duck.

Now as they stand, both kinds of question invite the stereotypic philosophers' response: what exactly do you mean -- in this case, specifically, what do you mean by 'study', what sort of practice do you have in mind? There are three obvious kinds of case we might want to consider. First, why do undergraduates read Aristotle, Descartes and Kant; and why *should* they? Those are questions

about the role of the philosophical canon in a university education. Then there's the pair of questions which cuts closer to the bone for most of us here: why do some of us devote our professional research careers to trying to figure out what Plato or Leibniz or Ockham really meant to say (just to give a rough description of what it is that so many of us are going to go back to doing next week); and why *should* we -- why should anyone? (This is the close to the bone part, of course.) And third, there's a question about how the study of the history of philosophy relates to philosophy itself as practiced today -- to problem-solving or constructive philosophy, we might say -- I'll simply refer to it as 'contemporary' philosophy, to be contrasted with history. Why do contemporary philosophers spend as much time as they do thinking about thinkers and arguments of the past? And, again, why might they be right to do so?

I've divided the question up not only because it's the thing I know how to do, but because the answers seem to me to be quite different in the different cases, and not very closely connected to each other. There's nothing *a priori* about this. In principle, the answers might even be uniform: that is, perhaps all three groups should study the history of philosophy for just the same reasons, and perhaps they in fact do so. But I doubt that that's true -- and we can see why it would be unlikely, given that 'studying the history of philosophy' is going to mean three quite different things in the three cases.

Let's start by looking at what seems to me the easiest case, question (1b). Why should undergraduates be encouraged to read and think about some of the mighty philosophical dead? Really there are almost too many reasons to bother rehearsing. To sharpen their analytical and critical skills; to acquire important

new ideas and concepts (new vocabulary, even); to expand their reading and interpretive abilities; to taste the intrinsic fascinations of watching great minds at work; to learn something about big-picture intellectual history and its relation to history of other kinds; to start to learn to think philosophically themselves by studying some important models; and so forth on and on. Moreover, depending on the period and the figures studied, students can either learn important things about where our own society's intellectual framework (such as it is) comes from, *or* encounter some radically different alternatives it -- or, in the case of ancient Greek philosophy, both.

In sum, the study of the history of philosophy -- at this basic, go-back-to-your-dorm-and-read-the-*Meditations* level -- is mind-sharpening and mind-expanding in all sorts of powerful and uncontroversially worthwhile ways. And so far as I can tell the descriptive answer, the answer to question (1a), seems to track the normative one pretty well. Students who are privileged to have the chance of a liberal arts education -- and of course those students are in the minority these days -- seem to be happy to sign up for our courses. At Toronto we have no trouble filling what seem to me enormous classes on the history of philosophy -- and that with students of every conceivable ethnic, cultural, economic and intellectual background, many of whom must be under considerable social and parental pressure to take something more 'practical'. I can't think of any bad reasons for this to happen; so I hypothesise that our students are, in a hazy and intuitive way, responding to some of the good ones. Even these days, plenty of students are motivated by genuine intellectual curiosity, and can intuit that our subject has something of value to offer them.

Does this help us with any of the other questions? Well, it suggests a possible line of response to (2a) and (2b), our questions about the specialist: perhaps one reason that people do, and should, specialize in the history of philosophy is so as to make it available to students. This suggests a view of the historian's trade as a service industry, its value instrumental, its ultimate purpose to trickle down into the classroom.

Now I don't think anyone would deny that this is, and should be, *part* of what specialist history of philosophy is for. But as an answer to (2) it seems misleading and incomplete. Descriptively, I doubt that we specialists really orient ourselves in this instrumental way: if we did, translation would be recognised as the historian's highest calling, and a publication with Hackett would be worth five with OUP for tenure and promotion purposes. Of course, more esoteric sorts of research can also have their impact on what gets transmitted to students, directly or indirectly; but the lines of transmission are unclear and not necessarily very effective. How many of us would care to vouch for our undergraduate teaching being absolutely state of the art on all the figures we teach?

Moreover, to play devil's advocate, I am not in fact sure that our contemporary super-specialized, ultra-detailed, high-resolution history of philosophy is better for undergraduates than any other kind. Again, it clearly is important to have modern translations and user-friendly editions of the texts themselves; and god bless Hackett. But most of us devote more of our energies to the production of relatively esoteric journal articles and books, aimed at an audience of other scholars; and the value added of these at the undergraduate level is not so obvious. When I was an undergraduate I spent quite a bit of time (much more

than I do now) hanging around the philosophy stacks in the library, and in my naivete I read whatever happened to be on the shelves -- the books that were never taken out and no longer read, literally dusty Victorian monographs and oddities of all sorts (and a lot of Father Copleston). Even then I could see that something was not quite right with a lot of this stuff, but so much the better: it was enormously engaging and encouraging to be able to argue against it, if only in my head, and to think I could perhaps do better. Nowadays I don't go quite so far as to deliberately assign outdated work to my students to read; but I do feel a bit of reluctance to introduce them even -- or especially -- to first-rate current 'secondary literature', on the rare occasions when it's available in some form accessible to them. Better that they should get some part of the way by themselves, rather than have the right reading (or a strong candidate for the right reading) handed to them on a plate. And what chance would an undergraduate have nowadays, arguing in her head against Terry Irwin or Victor Caston?

I conclude that the instrumental argument from teaching might warrant *some* specialised field we could call 'the history of philosophy'; but it doesn't ground the field and the practices we actually have. So much the worse for us, you might think; but I draw a different inference, which is that the answer to (2) really lies elsewhere. As far as I can see, we specialists do what we do primarily because we find it fascinating; and that should be justification enough. In short, we should take the Housman line. I'm referring here to A.E. Housman, who was a great classical philologist as well as a poet, and who, notoriously, viewed his craft as a cross between a hard science and a blood sport. In his Introductory Lecture as Professor of Latin at UCL, Housman argued against attempts to defend classical

studies, and higher learning in general, as either practically useful *or* morally improving:

"So we find that the two fancied aims of learning <i.e., practical utility and moral improvement> laid down by these two parties will not stand the test of examination. And no wonder; for these are the fabrications of men anxious to impose their own favourite pursuits on others, or of men who are ill at ease in their conscience until they have invented some external justification for those pursuits. The acquisition of knowledge needs no such justification: its true sanction is a much simpler affair, and inherent in itself. People are too prone to torment themselves with devising far-fetched reasons: they cannot be content with the simple truth asserted by Aristotle: 'all men possess by nature a craving for knowledge', πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει. This is no rare endowment scattered sparingly from heaven that falls on a few heads and passed others by: curiosity, the desire to know things as they are, is a craving no less native to the being of man, no less universal through mankind, than the craving for food and drink. And do you suppose that such a desire means nothing? The very definition of the good, says Aristotle again, is that which all desire. Whatever is pleasant is good, unless it can be shewn that in the long run it is harmful, or in other words, not pleasant but unpleasant.... The desire of knowledge does not need, nor could it possibly possess, any higher or more authentic sanction than the happiness which attends its gratification."

As historians of philosophy, we might want to hear more about just what Aristotle meant to claim here; and we might also feel some unease about Housman's narrowly hedonistic assumptions. But that the history of philosophy

is -- like most forms of learning -- practiced and valued primarily as an end in itself seems to me infinitely more plausible than any instrumentalist alternative. And here, in the case of question (2) as with question (1), the answers to the descriptive and the normative questions seem to me to be reasonably well aligned: that is, it seems to me that people by and large are studying the history of philosophy for roughly the reasons there are to study it. (I should perhaps specify here that I'm not addressing questions of funding. How and why anyone gets *paid* to study the history of philosophy seems to me a different question; and here the answers might well be instrumental.)

So I now turn to question (3), and the value of history of philosophy to the contemporary philosophical practitioner. It's a striking fact that problem-solving philosophy *is* bound up with thinking about the history of philosophy, in a way that's often been remarked on as distinctive of the field. For instance, just think of the way that in the past century philosophers such as G.E.M. Anscombe, Bernard Williams, John McDowell, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Chris Korsgaard have all made massive (and radically different) uses of Aristotle in their moral philosophy. It would be a mistake, I think, to see this as some kind of unitary phenomenon (a collective 'back-to-Aristotle' movement) which might have a special one-off cause. (Any label that might apply equally to all of Williams, Korsgaard, and MacIntyre can, I think, be safely said to be missing the point.) Rather, there is a general, industry-wide phenomenon here. In fact, seeing the wildly different sorts of uses to which Aristotle has been put reminds me of those strategy board games like Risk and Diplomacy. Aristotle seems to be the philosophical equivalent of the Brenner Pass, Iceland, or the oil fields of Baku -- a

crucial resource for almost *anybody's* strategic purposes. The puzzle is how that can still be true.

I'm going to approach that question somewhat obliquely, by way of responding to a very interesting recent paper by Martin Lin, called 'Philosophy and its History'. As Lin points out, graduate students in physics aren't typically required to study the history of physics, and physicists don't invoke Newton in the way that so many contemporary philosophers do Aristotle and Kant. Now (and this is a point Lin doesn't make, and perhaps implicitly denies) I think the contrast may be less clear in the social sciences and humanities: economists are still interested in Keynes vs. Hayek, and I believe some literary theorists still cite Bakhtin. So the boring conclusion might be simply that philosophy is more like those subjects than it is like the hard sciences. But I'm in any case less interested in the comparative or classificatory question than in *what it is* that contemporary philosophers do with the history of the discipline, and why.

Now the principal question Lin is concerned with is how one should practice the history of philosophy, given this distinctive feature of the subject -- or rather, with what self-conception one should do so, since the approaches he discusses in the end lead only to modest differences in practice (unless taken to caricatural extremes). Of the two approaches distinguished by Lin, one, which he associates with Jonathan Bennett, is to treat the historical philosopher like a colleague in the common room -- someone whose ideas we can learn from, whose arguments we should engage with, test, and perhaps refute, without worrying too much about anachronism or contextual detail. The other approach, which he associates with Dan Garber, attempts to study the thought of an historical figure *wie es eigentlich*



*gewesen* -- that is, in its own context and thought-world, through a deep understanding of its own terminology, assumptions and horizons. To do so is not to give up on contemporary relevance, but to lay a different sort of bet as to where it is likely to lie -- namely in the *otherness* of what earlier philosophers have to say, the radically different options they open up. Serious work in the history of philosophy is tourism in an exotic land; and the philosopher who never takes a trip is likely to do parochial, stunted, question-begging work.

So Lin isn't concerned with the distinction between my questions (2) and (3), which makes his discussion a bit orthogonal to mine; but I'm going to discuss these options as a pair of rival answers to our (3). And at this point I should emphasise that I'm not concerned here with whether Lin represents Bennett and Garber fairly, and that I won't be attempting to stay particularly close to Lin's own presentation myself. Rather I'm using his paper as an opportunity to think aloud on the same themes, loosely following what I take to be his general line of argument. And indeed rather than speak of Bennett and Garber, we might abstract still further and speak of the *Faulkner* and *Hartley* options, invoking two famous dicta from modern novels:

"The past is never dead. It's not even past." William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there", L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

Neither author is talking about the history of philosophy, of course; and Faulkner's point is less that we can learn from arguing with the past than that it may function as an ongoing reality, even a curse. Still, that the past of philosophy

is *not* in fact past seems a good way of putting the thought that underlies the 'common-room' approach. In fact, on closer inspection, it might be taken to support either of two very different approaches. One would be the Bennett, common-room line; but another, more *echt* Faulknerian stance seems worth distinguishing as an alternative. That is, we might see the past of philosophy as a present weight and an enduring force, whose story we have to tell in order to see our own position for what it is. This would lead us to history of philosophy in the form of what Richard Rorty calls *Geistesgeschichte*, in his important 1984 paper on four types of the history of philosophy. *Geistesgeschichte* is intellectual story-telling about what how we got where we are, with a diagnosis of the present and a prescription for the future. An obvious contemporary example would be Alasdair MacIntyre, and in particular the narrative of decline and fall which he tells in *After Virtue*.

So both 'Faulkner' approaches offer us ways of explaining the enduring usefulness of history to contemporary philosophy, explanations which might support different conceptions of how history should be done; and so in a very different way does the Garber or 'Hartley' alternative, which views the past as an exotic and mind-expanding Other. As Lin notes, though, this divide leads to less difference in practice than one might expect: most serious historians of philosophy strive to be sensitive to historical context and original intent while still engaging robustly with the arguments, and there is no real conflict between the two goals. (Arguably the approaches converge at their best: any deep and genuine engagement with an exotic Other, after all, must include a willingness to express disagreement and get into an argument; and even an intramural

common-room debate should be exegetically sensitive and open to deep difference.)

At this point a striking and disturbing fact emerges, namely that *both* answers raise the same perplexing question. If the philosophical past is a foreign country, but one well worth visiting for philosophical purposes; or if it is alive and well and not alien at all, but able to help and correct us in contemporary inquiries; then either way it seems to follow that the present has no particular privilege. Either way, it seems, *we seem not to have progressed* beyond the past. If we had, then Leibniz and Spinoza would not be useful to us as interlocutors, any more than Robert Boyle is for contemporary chemists.

Lin's own conclusion, in the face of this alarming implication, is simple. It is to accept that philosophy is so very hard, and progresses so very *slowly*, that we *are* for practical purposes still part of the same problem-space as our historical predecessors. And so we ignore their solutions at our peril.

This at least offers us a simple, Bennett-favouring explanation of why the best practice of contemporary philosophy often involves recourse to historical figures. Philosophy is not a solitary pursuit, and anyone engaged in a serious attempt to solve philosophical problems needs interlocutors -- needs to read, react to, and argue with other people. To consult historical figures on some problem is just to be choosy about one's interlocutors, selecting the most diverse and accomplished range of discussants possible from the whole field. To engage with the greatest figures of the past *should* be more philosophically rewarding than, but not radically different from, engaging with a narrow circle of one's contemporaries.

(When I was in graduate school at Princeton in the 90's, I would sometimes tease my analytic-philosophy friends that they too were doing 'history of philosophy' - they were just doing it about a rather narrow and uninteresting period, namely the present.)

All this seems plausible enough. Still, there is something vaguely comical, I can't help feeling, about Lin's suggestion -- about his depiction of 25 centuries of high-powered, heroic philosophical effort as leading at most to *just barely detectable* progress. At the same time, however paradoxical it may sound, this 'minimal-progress' view is arguably what our ordinary practices and assumptions in the field *do* presuppose. On the one hand, when I sit down to write a paper on the nature of akrasia, for instance, I must believe that it is possible for me to solve at least some subset of the philosophical puzzles raised by the topic. But if one of my preferred interlocutors is Aristotle, what does that say about the value added by the intervening centuries of work on the subject? I must believe that no decisive progress has been made between his time and mine, yet be untroubled by the obvious inductive inference regarding my own work. I must be optimistically convinced, as I set down to work, that *this time it's different*. But that view just seems ridiculous, and obviously a self-serving delusion, once it's made explicit.

It seems not only simpler but more credible and charitable to conclude that philosophy is not the kind of enterprise that makes progress *at all*. But this apparent lack of progress in philosophy is itself a deep philosophical puzzle -- and, perhaps unsurprisingly, one on which we don't seem to have made much progress. For it raises the question of what I *am* attempting to do when I sit down

to work a philosophical problem-solver in the first place. To spell out the puzzle a bit more:

(i) If Aristotle is as useful an interlocutor as anybody on questions about the theory of action, it can only be because philosophy has made no detectable progress on these questions since Aristotle's day.

(ii) If philosophy has made no detectable progress on the theory of action since Aristotle's day, philosophy is not the kind of pursuit that makes progress.

From here two kinds of objection emerge. One is the pragmatic paradox I have noted already:

(iii) *The paradox:* But if philosophy is not the kind of pursuit that makes progress, what exactly are we trying to do when we do action theory, with Aristotle or without him?

The other difficulty is very different: namely that the inference drawn in (ii) actually seems, from another angle of vision, to be empirically false. That is, philosophical progress does *not* seem to be minimal or even hard to come by:

(iv) *The empirical objection:* But philosophical progress takes place all the time!

After all, just think of any recent explosion in the philosophical literature, on topics like truth in fiction or the context-sensitivity of knowledge attributions. Surely in these cases one really does see improvements in the views articulated in one journal article after another, as each corrects its predecessors and introduces helpful new options, arguments, and distinctions. Of course there may be a step back for every two steps forward, and these debates are more

likely to end in exhaustion than consensus; but certainly these booms, while they last, give the impression that progress is being made. That's why in philosophy the much-cited, landmark paper or book isn't the one which establishes some important new finding to general acclaim, as in the sciences. It's almost always one which can be, and soon is, refuted or corrected from many different angles. This process leads rapidly not only to new-and-improved versions of the original view, but to competitors suggested by its shortcomings, and to illuminating arguments over where the most difficult or deepest problem with it really lies. (This is true in the history of philosophy as well: think of Gregory Vlastos' papers on the Third Man Argument or Pauline Predication.)

And this is hardly a recent phenomenon -- it's not as if we had only started to make progress since the founding of *Mind* and *Analysis*. On the contrary, philosophical progress is cheap and always has been. Leibniz really does correct Locke on any number of points in his *New Essays*, and it's easy to tell a progressivist story when teaching Descartes-Spinoza-Leibniz or Locke-Berkeley-Hume -- that's one of the reasons those courses are so standard and useful for beginning students. For that matter, the first three canonical philosophers in the Western tradition form as neat a story of philosophical progress as you could ask for. Thales, officially the first philosopher since Aristotle's canonical recounting of the story in *Metaphysics A*, claim that the first principle of all things was water. Not a bad conjecture, given the essential role of water in sustaining life, its transformations into substances as different as mist and ice, and the then-plausible hypothesis that the earth rests upon the ocean. The difficulty, of course, is that water is hard to picture as the originating principle of, for instance, fire:

surely the *archê*, the first principle, of all things ought to be something more qualitatively neutral. Enter philosopher #2, Anaximander, whose first principle was the *apeiron*, the Unlimited or Indefinite. That meets the obvious objection to Thales, but seems to have a new weakness. This *apeiron* is not directly observed but a theoretical postulate: it would be otiose if we could do without it. So the third philosopher, Anaximenes, proposes another first principle again: air, which arguably has the neutrality and malleability of the *apeiron* while better respecting Ockham's already-operative razor.

It makes a pretty story, and quite possibly a true one. And what more would we need, to affirm that philosophy does make progress? But there's a paradox, which is that this rapid local progress always seems to dissolve and disappear when we pull back and view the history of philosophy as a whole. Anaximenes may represent progress over Thales, but by the time we get to the last of the *archê*-mongering Presocratics, Diogenes of Apollonia, the increments of problem-solving no longer look significant; and Plato and Aristotle introduce a new paradigm which seems to render them moot. So what can we say about the bigger picture? Did David Lewis represent progress over Spinoza? Did Mill get more more things right than Aristotle? (Was he a *better* philosopher? And is that the same question, and if not why not?)

At this point I want to turn sideways again and introduce a third way of thinking about the history of philosophy, this time from a 'contemporary' philosopher (in my sense, that is, as opposed to a specialist historian), John Rawls. This is an extraordinary passage cited in Barbara Herman's Introduction to his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*. It's an extract from a piece originally written for a

volume on Burton Dreben, in which Rawls discusses his own practice as a teacher of the history of philosophy:

"When lecturing on Locke, Rousseau, Kant, or J.S. Mill I always tried to do two things especially. One was to pose their problems as they themselves saw them, given what their understanding of these problems was in their own time. I often cited the remark of Collingwood that 'the history of political theory is not the history of different answers to one and the same question, but the history of a problem more or less constantly changing, whose solution was changing with it'...

I always took it for granted that the writers we were studying were much smarter than I was. If they were not, why was I wasting my time and the students' time by studying them? If I saw a mistake in their arguments, I supposed those writers saw it too and must have dealt with it. But where? I looked for their way out, not mine. Sometimes their way out was historical: in their day the question need not be raised, or wouldn't arise and so couldn't then be fruitfully discussed. Or there was a part of the text I had overlooked, or had not read. I assumed there were never plain mistakes, not ones that mattered anyway... The result was that I was loath to raise objections to the exemplars; that's too easy and misses what is essential. However, it was important to point out difficulties that those coming later in the same tradition sought to overcome, or to point to views those in other traditions thought were mistaken....

With Kant I hardly made any criticisms at all. My efforts were centered on trying to understand him so as to be able to describe his ideas to the students.



Sometimes I would discuss well-known objections to his moral doctrine, such as those of Schiller and Hegel, Schopenhauer and Mill. Going over these is instructive and clarifies Kant's view. Yet I never felt satisfied with the understanding I achieved of Kant's doctrine as a whole... All the great figures... lie to some degree beyond us, no matter how hard we try to master their thought. With Kant this distance often seems to me somehow much greater. Like great composers and great artists -- Mozart and Beethoven, Poussin and Turner - - they are beyond envy. It is vital in lecturing to try to exhibit to students in one's speech and conduct a sense of this, and why it is so. That can only be done by taking the thought of the text seriously, as worthy of honor and respect. This may at times be a kind of reverence, yet it is sharply distinct from adulation or uncritical acceptance of the text or author as authoritative. "

This is extraordinary, resonant stuff. One thing which leaps out is an extremely attractive humility; also a profound seriousness of purpose -- and, if it's not too awkward a word, *love* for the figures he's talking about. Who wouldn't want to sign up for Rawls' course, and hope for all of that to rub off? But on reflection there are also some extremely peculiar assumptions here. It isn't, after all, even faintly plausible that the figures Rawls taught were all much smarter than he was -- or, for that matter, that 'smart' is the relevant quality here. The claim that they never made plain mistakes, including on major points, is to me astounding. Rawls' use of the word 'exemplars' is telling here. His attitude *is* reverential, as he admits. Indeed his deference to one past philosopher apparently ends only where the criticisms made by another begin -- a bit awkward given how very un-deferential the mighty dead mostly were to each other.

In fact, I'm reminded of Socrates' attitude to the god at Delphi, as he relates the tale of the Delphic oracle in the *Apology*. The god has declared that there is no one wiser than Socrates. Socrates cannot believe this is true; yet the God *cannot* say something false. This impasse leads Socrates to undertake his mission of inquiry, investigating putative wise men in order to see what their wisdom really amounts to. In his first reference to this inquiry in the *Apology*, Socrates actually frames it as an attempt to 'refute' the God; but by the end of the story it has become a mission of vindication, and I suspect that his initial use of 'refute' is just a playful touch. Really Socrates is all along attempting a task of sympathetic, indeed reverential exegesis: he's attempting to identify an interpretation on which what the god says can be -- *as it must be* -- true. And, paradoxically, it's precisely because he knows in advance that the God must be right, that Socrates' inquiry can take the form of independent philosophical examination rather than anything narrowly exegetical. If the object of your interpretation is certain to be true, you can find out what it means by identifying the correct view independently, and interpreting it as saying *that*. This too is not an unfamiliar practice in the history of philosophy.

Well, there are obvious dangers in any hermeneutic which involves treating Kant as the god Apollo. But Rawls' approach *is* a wonderful philosophical heuristic; and that holds whether or not we agree that the great philosophers never make big mistakes. One might suspect, for instance, that at the end of dialectic, when every line of attack and defense has been investigated to the ultimate pitch of philosophical refinement, the obvious freshman objections to Kant's categorical imperative (or their infinitely-tweaked successors) are in fact likely to be the

decisive ones. But that hypothesis can only be tested by a rigorous, inventive, increasingly subtle back-and-forth of objections, defenses and constructive reinterpretations -- where the defenses and reconstructions must be offered by a committed and resourceful advocate, someone taking more or less the Rawlsian approach. This back-and-forth is itself an exercise in philosophical problem-solving, a process in which each step lays bear new interconnections in the topology of the problem. It's philosophy conducted *with* or *through* the historical philosopher. (I like Sarah Broadie's phrasing, *with*, in the title of her book, *Ethics with Aristotle*.) This is what a lot of specialist historians now do much of the time; and so do contemporary philosophers who are seeking a deep engagement with some predecessor.

Rawls' hermeneutic has another dimension worth bringing out. This comes to the fore in his comparison of the great philosophers to artists like Mozart and Beethoven, or Poussin and Turner. This isn't just rhetoric, I would argue, or the expression of an old-fashioned, Great Man approach to the subject -- there's a real parallel to be drawn. In particular, painting, it seems to me, is plausibly occupied with its history in something much like the way philosophy is. The past of painting certainly isn't dead, or even past -- it's all around the young painter who must decide just how much to study, copy from, parody, cite, appropriate, and generally engage with her predecessors. (And I don't think it's necessarily metaphorical to speak of one painter as attempting to argue with or even refute another, either.) At the same time the past of painting is indeed a foreign country. No one can now paint the way Cezanne did -- or even take photographs the way Cartier-Bresson did fifty years ago (see last passage on the handout). To

*literally* paint the way Cezanne did could only be a matter of forgery, affectation, or illustration -- or perhaps an ironic performance like that of Pierre Menard, 'author' of the *Don Quixote*, in the Borges story. And a real Cezanne is *not* a forgery, affectation, illustration, or ironic performance; so to do those things would not be to paint like Cezanne at all. At the same time there's no limit to the ways in which a young painter today might try to *learn* from Cezanne. These strategies of learning range from small-scale copying and trick-stealing all the way up to hazy and ambitious projects of emulation. By a project of emulation I mean something like this: 'to do for *my* time and place, with *my* resources and starting-points as a painter, using everything we've seen and know today, something like what Cezanne did for *his* place and time'. That's a perfectly intelligible, if terrifyingly ambitious project; and I don't think it's far-fetched to see Rawls himself as emulating Kant in just that sense, and studying him in order to learn how to do it.

Now the usefulness of a Cezanne (or a Rembrandt or Velasquez) in this way seems to be dependent on a straightforward sense in which painting doesn't progress (see handout #). The greats are as great as they ever were; indeed the drawings and paintings at Le Chauvet or Lascaux, our very oldest visual art, are as good as anything. (I'm not sure one would make *quite* that claim that for Thales or Anaximenes, but this is not necessarily a real disanalogy; if everything before Plato or Aristotle had been completely lost, which is perfectly thinkable, the beginnings of philosophy would be as shockingly great as the beginnings of drawing and painting.) It seems bizarre even to ask whether Monet represented 'progress' over Piero della Francesca -- one might have a view about which was

the better painter, but it wouldn't have anything to do with their temporal ordering. And the Rawlsian stance, which might sound old-fashioned and questionable in the case of philosophy, is just the natural default stance of the working painter seeking to learn from the past. It's more easily available here than in philosophy only because it's easier to see how all the canonical great painters can have got something importantly *right*.

So let's consider the hypothesis that the relation of philosophy to its history is something like the relation of painting to its. What does that imply for our problems about progress?

Not exactly, *pace* Hockney, that there is no such thing. For in painting too there is the kind of local, incremental, problem-solving progress that we saw in the case of philosophy. Art historians teach Duccio-Giotto-Masaccio in much the way that historians of philosophy teach Locke-Berkeley-Hume; or compare Cezanne-Picasso and Frege-Russell as narratives of more heroic, modernist progress. The progress is *only* ever local, though, because -- and in the case of painting it is easier to see this clearly -- there's always something local *about the problems as well*. Admittedly, at a sufficient level of abstraction the central problems of painting look constant and eternal. How to represent three dimensions in two, how to express human character through the visual surface, how to capture drama and temporality in a static image, how to make the most of colour without being merely decorative, how to convey complex spiritual ideas through colour and line alone. But all these problems present themselves to the painter in a locally inflected way; they're given specificity and bite by a particular historical context. The range of solutions open to me as a painter is shaped by what's been

tried in the past, by what my contemporary rivals are up to, and by what possible future directions are thinkable to me.

It seems to me that philosophical problem-solving works in much the same way. To ask what is motion? what are the virtues? or what is there really? is to enter into a more or less perennial debate -- albeit one in which, as Collingwood and Rawls warn, the meaning of the question may shift quite a bit over time. But the answers to those questions are localized, and for obvious reasons: our philosophical sense of what answers are thinkable, plausible, or compelling, what assumptions are safe and what concepts are well-formed, are all local themselves. That is, they're always bounded and controlled to some degree by pre-philosophical intuitions which are in turn shaped by the broader cultural world we inherit. We can no longer really think like Leibniz, any more than we can paint like Velasquez. But thinking *with*, thinking *through*, even thinking *against* are all open to us and all useful. Those past exemplars are, at their best and most interesting, heroic exercises in the solving of problems which are both the same as ours and different, at once deeply foreign and not past at all.

Let me say a bit more about what I think does and doesn't follow from this analogy. First of all, I *don't* mean to suggest that philosophy is 'really' an art form. This kind of use of the past might be shared by a wide range of enterprises: in fact I suspect we would find a similar, broadly Rawlsian attitude among top chess players and military strategists. What painting, philosophy and games of strategy all share is, again, an attempt to solve problems which look constant when viewed at a sufficiently high level of abstraction, but which we can only ever engage with once they are shaped by localizing factors which severely

restrict and complicate the possible solutions -- so that exemplary past solutions can be endlessly learned from, but not just mechanically reproduced.

Second, I don't of course mean to deny that we can evaluate the work of past philosophers as composed of eternally and objectively true or false claims, right or wrong positions, valid or invalid arguments. Those are, I take it, what philosophers traffick in; and clearly painters don't. And one might think that that's a pretty important disanalogy, entailing that progress (or the lack of it) could not be the same kind of thing in the two disciplines. In philosophy, we at least can say what progress *would* be: over time, true claims, sound arguments, and concepts which 'carve up nature at the joints', would all drive out the false, unsound and confused. If that *doesn't* happen, there is a puzzle about how the philosophical enterprise works: but it's unclear what would even count as an analogous puzzle in the artistic case.

I think, though, that this objection misses the point, and so can help me to clarify, in closing, just what the point is. That is, I think what the analogy shows is that when we interest ourselves seriously in a past philosopher, the object of our interest is *not* simply the system of truth-evaluable claims and valid or invalid arguments which makes up that philosopher's theory. Rather, it's that system of claims and arguments *viewed as a solution to a philosophical problem*. And it's precisely because the problems are localized, never presenting themselves in exactly the same guise twice, that neither the heroic, exemplary solutions of the great philosophers *nor* incremental local improvements ever lead to lasting progress.

Finally, I want to grant that the analogy does nothing to settle some of the questions about methodology raised by Martin Lin's paper. Again, my concern here has really been with question (3) rather than (2) -- with the utility of philosophy's history to the working contemporary philosopher. And if anything, the parallel with painting suggests that those questions really are quite distinct -- that is, that the 'contemporary philosophers' and the specialist historians are up to very different things. After all, in the case of painting, art history or criticism is obviously a fundamentally different enterprise from the making of art itself, however deeply engaged with the past the latter may be. And it seems to be something of an accidental complicating factor that it's otherwise in philosophy - - that is, that in our case the history of the discipline uses the same basic medium as the discipline itself, namely language. (And language of roughly the same kind too, namely more or less abstract argument.) Imagine if art critics were only allowed to express themselves by making paintings of their own, paintings which somehow analysed and explained other paintings! The result would be just the kind of blurring of the lines between interpretative and original work which we get in philosophy. But the analogy (or rather, in this case, disanalogy) suggests that it's always worth keeping clearly in view which enterprise we're engaged in (philosophical or historical) and which set of purposes we're trying to serve, even if the answer will sometimes be 'both'.

This also suggests that when the history of philosophy is studied *for the purposes of contemporary philosophy*, a wild multiplicity of approaches can have value. After all in the case of painting it's clear that all sorts of appropriations and engagements can be very fruitful, running the gamut from reverent emulation to



fruitful antagonism and critique, and not excluding simple theft. Why not in the case of philosophy as well? As a non-historian colleague of mine said to me in the hall the other day, "I view the history of philosophy as a magnificent junkyard." I took him to mean not only that he enjoyed wandering around in it, but that he felt free to nick what he liked and use it as he pleased, without scruples. And that seems to me a perfectly reasonable way to engage with the history of philosophy, however different from the way of the historian it may be.