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Approaches to the History of Philosophical Concepts

Intersections of the History of Philosophy with Intellectual History and Conceptual History

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Abstract

This article addresses historiographical questions about the concepts by which philosophy attempts to provide answers to the problems it poses. It argues for a view of philosophy as a historically dynamic intellectual practice that has no clear and fixed boundaries separating it from other disciplines. It proposes that the history of philosophy should be practiced as a kind of history that lies within, rather than outside, intellectual history. It shows that philosophical concepts are sometimes born and persist within philosophy, sometimes die without passing through philosophy, and sometimes come from or migrate to other disciplines. It also argues that the methodology of conceptual history can be helpful in the study of philosophical concepts. The article concludes that the history of philosophy is relevant in its own right and suggests how the new histories of philosophy written from postcolonial, global, and feminist perspectives are a clear example of this.

Keywords

Philosophy; intellectual history; conceptual history

The migration of concepts

In one of the earliest and most influential philosophical lexicons of the 17th century, the *Philosophical Lexicon in which the Doors of Philosophy are Open as by a Key (Lexicon philosophicum quo tanquam clave philosophiae fores aperiuntur)* of Rudolf Goclenius (1613, p. 291), we find the Latin term *unguis*. The author associates it with various concepts: a part of the body of certain animals (nail, claw), the claw-like base of certain flower petals, a type of stone (onyx), an instrument for harvesting grapes, and so on. In another important philosophical lexicon of the time, the *Philosophical Lexicon of the Terms Used by Philosophers (Lexicon philosophicum terminorum philosophis usitatorum)* by Johann Micraelius (1653, p. 713), we find the term *nitrum*, referring to the mineral that we now know as "nitre". To the reader of the 21st century, the inclusion of these terms in philosophical dictionaries sounds surprising. No dictionary of philosophy today would include them. Why were the concepts denoted by these terms considered philosophical concepts in the 17th century? Why have they ceased to be philosophical concepts? In short, what makes a concept philosophical?

The above examples of the concepts of nail and nitre clearly show that they migrated from what was then considered part of philosophical knowledge to other disciplines that became autonomous in later centuries, such as biology and chemistry. This shows that concepts clearly do not have a fixed or exclusive affiliation to a particular discipline, but are, so to speak, "migrant" entities. The historiographical program known as the "history of ideas," led by Arthur Lovejoy, was particularly interested in the dynamics of such migrations. Lovejoy argued for a historical narrative focused on "unit ideas" that are composed and decomposed of each other and that migrate from one disciplinary field to another (Lovejoy, 1936; 1940). Such an approach implies that historical research must adopt an interdisciplinary perspective, since ideas are not thought to belong exclusively to one field. A fortiori, this interdisciplinary perspective challenged the ways and reasons why historians were able to qualify a given unit-idea as philosophical, theological, political, etc., since the boundaries distinguishing the disciplines proved to be blurred.

Although Lovejoy's program is still supported by some historians (Diggins, 2006; Grafton, 2006), his controversial notion of unit ideas has been heavily criticized. The program as a whole has been replaced by other approaches, such as intellectual history and conceptual history. The new "intellectual history", usually known as the "Cambridge School," was initiated by Quentin Skinner, J.G.A. Pocock, and John Dunn in the 1960s and 1970s as a methodological reform of Lovejoy's history of ideas. It introduced into Lovejoy's program a particular kind of contextualism that focused on the linguistic context of the utterance, the main goal of which, according to Skinner,

was to recover the author's intention (Skinner, 1969)[1]. Conceptual history, led in the 1980s by Reinhart Koselleck, Otto Brunner, and Werner Conze, introduced a new sense of the historicity of concepts into the German tradition of *Ideengeschichte*, combining synchronic and diachronic semantic analysis and arguing that concepts transcend their original contexts of utterance and project themselves forward in time (Sgarbi, 2010; Palti, 2010).

These new approaches have overcome some of the methodological shortcomings of Lovejoy's history of ideas, but they still leave open the question of the boundaries of intellectual fields and concepts. For example, if the concept of "soul" is an integral part of debates and theories in philosophy, theology, biology, and physics, why or in what sense could it be said that there is a "philosophical concept" of the soul? To take the example that I will discuss later in this paper, if the concept of law has been discussed in philosophy, law, theology, and a number of scientific branches such as geometry, astronomy, and physics, why might it be claimed that the history of the concept of law of nature is the history of a philosophical concept?

An intellectual or a conceptual historian might simply reply that it does not really matter whether the concept of laws of nature is a philosophical concept or not, simply because the aim of their historical research is to gain a better understanding of the emergence and development of concepts in the past, not to put them into a disciplinary pigeonhole. Such an answer seems perfectly reasonable for intellectual or conceptual historians, but things are different when historians of philosophy are asked about it. It seems to me that what makes the situation of contemporary historians of philosophy different is the fact that they usually feel the need to demonstrate that their historical work actually has something to do with philosophy and, above all, that their work is relevant to current philosophical debates.

It would be a mistake to assume that philosophical relevance is synonymous with relevance to current philosophical debates. Regardless of relevance, however, it is a documented fact that historians of philosophy are often concerned with demonstrating the philosophical relevance of their work. As Daniel Garber notes in his observations of the attitudes of his colleagues, there is a prevailing preoccupation with this question:

> Virtually every fellow historian of philosophy I know would agree to the proposition that analytic philosophers should take the history of philosophy seriously. But, at the same time, virtually every historian of philosophy I know has at one time or another been involved in a heated conversation on the subject, and been forced to defend

1 As I'll say later, I am critical of Skinner's approach and advocate intellectual history in a different sense than the one he proposes. It should be noted that there is a long-established Latin American school of history of ideas that is not part of the theoretical framework on which I have worked for this paper. On this school, see Roig (1993)

> the philosophical relevance of the history of philosophy to a benighted colleague who simply can't see the point. This is my main topic for this essay: what might we tell our analytic colleagues when they complain about having to have historians of philosophy on their faculty, or history courses in their curriculum? What can we say about why they should take the study of the history of philosophy more seriously? (Garber, 2005, p. 129).

The introduction to the influential volume on the historiography of philosophy edited by Richard Rorty, Jerome Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (1984) may help to clarify the reasons why historians of philosophy have felt compelled to apologize for their work. On the one hand, they suggest that the history of philosophy must take its raw material from intellectual history. According to this proposal, whereas intellectual history does not care whether the problems and concepts it investigates fit into any disciplinary field, nor does it ask whether the doctrines of dead thinkers were true or false, the history of philosophy must focus only on philosophical questions and must evaluate the truth claims of dead philosophers.

According to Rorty et al., the history of philosophy mines intellectual history for material to build its own narrative, and the choices of philosophical historians will depend not only on the decade and country about which they write, but also on their particular interests within philosophy (Rorty et al., 1984, p. 3). On the other hand, the authors claim that the history of philosophy must filter out the philosophy of the past by selecting only those philosophical contents that have some interest and significance for contemporary philosophy:

> By filtering out certain sentences as irrelevant to his concerns, and to the concerns the author himself would have had if he had known more about how the world is, while giving a sympathetic rendering of the remainder, the historian of philosophy helps the dead philosopher put his act together for a new audience (Rorty et al., 1984, p. 6).

These authors argue that this particular way of "helping dead philosophers" reach new audiences. Translating their sentences to make them intelligible to contemporary readers involves a legitimate anachronism and is the right way to do history of philosophical:

> To say that such histories are anachronistic is true but pointless. They are *supposed* to be anachronistic. [...] Someone who wishes to write A History of Western Philosophy must, therefore, either deny that contemporary philosophy is something real and

> important (in which case he will write the history of philosophy as one might write the history of witchcraft), or else proceed to filter out the sentences which are not worth translating, while being conscientiously anachronistic in translating the remainder. Most such writers do a bit of both, for most of them despair of making a coherent story out of all the texts which one or another contemporary philosophical school calls 'philosophical'. [...] Each historian of philosophy is working for an 'us' which consists, primarily, of those who see the contemporary philosophical scene as he does (Rorty et al., 1984, p. 6-7).

Blurred disciplinary boundaries

A number of problems arise from the account of Rorty et al. First, they assert that the work of the historian of philosophy is radically different from the work of the intellectual historian. Second, they claim that the history of philosophy is exclusively about philosophy and nothing else. Both claims are supported by the assumption, noted by Leo Catana, that there is an invisible boundary separating what is external from what is internal to philosophy. Because of this boundary, problems are considered internal to past philosophy, while the contexts in which they arise are considered external to it (Catana, 2013, p. 118). This assumption is questionable because historical research shows that in the past, as in the present, there are no clear and obvious boundaries that distinguish philosophy from other intellectual fields. Moreover, historical research shows that philosophy is an evolving practice whose subjects, approaches, and boundaries are constantly changing.

My own approach starts from the premise, supported by a vast body of research provided by the last generations of historians of philosophy, that past and present philosophical reflections are very often related to, and most of the time intertwined with, intellectual reflections of non-philosophical disciplines. The disciplines historically associated with philosophy have not always been the same, of course, but have changed as the history of the disciplines has evolved over the centuries. Given this fact, I argue that the history of philosophy must be understood and practiced as a branch of intellectual history[2] that focuses on philosophical theories and problems. In this sense, the history of philosophy is a special kind of history that lies within, not outside, intellectual history.

2 I will come later to this point and explain my view of intellectual history and my differences with the Cambridge School.

This close relationship between the history of philosophy and the history of ideas could be seen as problematic in that the history of philosophy would seem to lose its own identity and thus be dissolved in the broader field of intellectual history, becoming confused and mixed up with topics and concepts that are integral to theology, law, natural science, and so on.[3] As a result, a number of questions arise from this approach: Is it plausible to claim that a history of philosophy done from the broader perspective of intellectual history is really distinct from the rest of intellectual history? How can the philosophical character of this kind of historical research be identified? More specifically, if this historical research based on intellectual history claims to be a history of philosophy, in what sense can it be said to deal with philosophical concepts? Is such a history of philosophy in any sense relevant to current philosophical debates?

If the goal of philosophy is to solve philosophical problems, then a concept is philosophical to the extent that it is part of the considerations that serve that goal. Following Catana's view (2013, p. 120), I take a philosophical problem to be a complex of theories and arguments that can be paraphrased by philosophers or historians of philosophy as a disjunctive question related to a theoretical description in the domain of philosophy. In this context, philosophical concepts are instrumental to the theories provided to solve philosophical problems, so that the main work of philosophers is to create concepts (Deleuze and Guattari, 1991).

Just as concepts are not specific to any one field, neither are problems. For an intellectual historian who claims to be doing the history of philosophy, the question then becomes which problems are typically philosophical. This leads us to an old and controversial question about the very definition of philosophy. I will give a crude nominalist answer to this long-standing question by claiming that what people think and say to be philosophical at any given moment (in any historical period) is philosophical.[4] A historian should then accept as philosophical those problems that are thought to be philosophical at any given time, not only in the past but also in the present. Thus, one can search in the past for problems that we consider philosophical today, and also for problems that were considered philosophical in the past, even if they are no longer considered so.

This approach is based on the view that philosophy is a historical and contingent human activity. The nature of philosophy and its subject matter have been understood differently in different places and times and by different actors. That the subject matter of philosophy is

3 A concern with the "risk" of applying the general principles of the "historical method" to philosophy is expressed by Zarka (2005, p. 154): "The general principles of history would apply to philosophy, just as to any other activity of the human mind. But then, what would be left not only of philosophy but even of the history of philosophy?"

4 This approach is in line with what Eileen O'Neill (2005, 192-93) suggests when arguing on the criteria to be used for counting certain past women writers as genuine philosophers.

variable rather than fixed is evident in the many forms that philosophy has taken in the past and is taking in the present. The way in which philosophy changes throughout history, however, does not reveal some kind of Hegelian process of ascent to a summit ideal. Problems and concepts, methods and approaches, goals and inspirations simply change along with the actors, places, and circumstances in which philosophy is practiced. This view implies that philosophy, being a human historical artifact, is dynamic, plural and flexible.

Life and death of philosophical concepts

What are the implications of the dynamic historicity of philosophy for conceptual continuity? Let's briefly consider the concept of law of nature as a case study. Certainly, the work and thought of Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, Isaac Newton, and Robert Boyle, among many others, show that the concept of law of nature was a philosophical concept in the early modern period (Steinle, 1995; Roux, 2001; Harrison, 2008; Henry, 2019). But is it still today a philosophical concept? What is now called natural science was considered a branch of philosophy —called natural philosophy— in the early modern period. At that time, a slow and complex process of transition from natural philosophy to natural science began, which only came to an end at the beginning of the 19th century, when both science and philosophy underwent a process of professionalization according to the new patterns of the university and the scientific system.

From this perspective, we can say that the concept of law of nature is a scientific concept today, insofar as it is related to scientific problems. In fact, most of the historical studies of the laws of nature are published in journals and publications of the history of science. One implication of this might be that the concept of law of nature is no longer a philosophical concept. However, contemporary philosophy of science is very much concerned with this concept, which plays a prominent role in contemporary science. It addresses several philosophical questions about the laws of nature, such as: What is a law of nature? How are laws related to natural phenomena? Do laws involve metaphysical necessity? How does the role of laws differ across the various sciences? There are great debates about some of these questions among contemporary philosophers of science and metaphysicians, in some cases combining the historical and theoretical approaches (Weinert, 1996; Carrol, 2016).

In this case, the value of the philosophical history of the concept of law of nature might be justified. The history of this concept could avoid being judged as "useless" or "irrelevant" because it might be interesting in some way for contemporary discussions. Perhaps one could even

add that contemporary debates in the philosophy of science make the concept of law of nature philosophical to the extent that it serves to solve metaphysical and epistemological problems of contemporary science. I also concede that this possibility is valid. On this assumption, the concept of law of nature would not only be relevant for contemporary philosophy because it is interesting for contemporary science, but it would also still be a philosophical concept today. The philosophical concept of law of nature would thus be kept alive.

Some philosophical concepts and problems, however, have a limited and sometimes quite short life. They are concepts that have lost their value for the philosophers of our time. They have died like the men and women who once found them valuable for thinking about or answering their problems. At one point in history, concepts such as "active intellect", "passive intellect", "nous", "animal spirit", or "primary quality" were considered valuable in solving philosophical problems. But today, as far as I know, none of them is an integral part of any contemporary philosophical theory. Although they were relevant to philosophers of past centuries, they are not relevant to contemporary philosophers.

The death of philosophical concepts can be due to various reasons. One reason might be that the problems they were intended to solve are no longer philosophical problems. An example of this might be the case of passive and active intellect: their lives came to an end along with the problems they were associated with. Another reason for the demise of philosophical concepts may be that, although the problems associated with them are still relevant today, the concepts themselves are no longer adopted as solutions to such problems. For example, the question of how to explain the physical motions of animate beings is relevant to contemporary biology, but this problem is no longer thought of in terms of animal spirits as it was in earlier centuries. Similarly, while causation remains a central problem in contemporary philosophy, the concept of an occasional cause, as conceived in the 17th century by authors such as Nicolas Malebranche and Margaret Cavendish, has fallen into disuse. Finally, some concepts have disappeared not only because they do not serve to answer current questions, but also because they do not serve to inspire new answers to current problems.

Now, is it possible to declare the "definitive death" of a philosophical concept? The answer is as uncertain as any attempt to determine the lifespan of living concepts. We cannot predict whether concepts that have fallen into disuse—those that seem to have died—might not be revived in the future. The death of concepts need not be permanent. They may be revived because they are interesting, inspiring, or useful for explaining new problems or for revisiting old problems that have attracted the attention of other periods of philosophical dynamism. If they have aged, they may be able to be rejuvenated and revived in the future by taking root in a more

fertile philosophical terrain. The concept of *haecceitas*, for example, flourished in the Middle Ages at the hands of Duns Scotus, and declined towards the end of the Middle Ages. Centuries later, it was revived in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988, p. 260-265), no longer with its original meaning, but in a new incarnation that has certain ties to the medieval horizon. The concept has been resurrected, as it were, with a new body.

The idea that there are perennial and universal philosophical problems whose answers recur throughout the centuries was classically supported in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Wilhelm Windelband and Nicolai Hartmann (Krüger, 1984; Sgarbi, 2011, p. 74-75). Perhaps the most profound challenge to this conception of philosophy centered on eternal problems was made by Hans Georg Gadamer (1993, p. 81-83), for whom every philosophical problem allows itself to be constantly reformulated in such a way that no solution can satisfy it. In this sense, a philosophical problem is like a question that has never really been asked. It is interesting to note, however, how some concepts take on new life and are incorporated into newer theories and accounts. Therefore, while I do not assume that problems or concepts are perennial, I do believe that we cannot fail to notice that history reveals, along with shifts and changes, continuities of certain very general problematic cores. It seems that certain questions recur in the history of philosophy, while others lose their relevance, along with the concepts that addressed or answered them.

Conceptual continuity and layers of meanings

Does this also allow us to postulate some kind of continuity in the history of philosophy? If there is a continuity, it seems preferable to look for it on the side of the questions and problems that appear in certain problematic cores, rather than on the side of the ideas. The assumption of the continuity of ideas, which the intellectual history of the Cambridge School somehow inherited from the school of Lovejoy - and which is in line with the German tradition of *Ideengeschichte*, upheld by Ernst Cassirer, among others - entails great complications, because the historian, in order to give continuity to an idea and make it recognizable, must attribute to it such a broad sense that he ends up blurring it and making it excessively broad. On the contrary, if the historian reduces the semantic core of an idea in order to give it a more precise meaning, she will have to leave out many cases in which such an idea would also be present (Sgarbi, 2010; Palti, 2010, p. 194-211).

The methodology of conceptual history avoids these problems because it does not presuppose a permanent core that survives change. Koselleck's proposal is presented as a fruitful

alternative to German *Ideengeschichte* and Anglo-Saxon intellectual history by understanding concepts as units of meaning that are transformed without retaining an intact semantic core (Sgarbi, 2010). Concepts cross epochs with different conditions of utterance and transcend disciplinary boundaries. They have "social and political capacities" because they form a semantic network through which people understand the world at a given time. They thus have a delimiting effect on the discursive order, establishing "a particular horizon for potential experience and conceivable theory" (Koselleck, 2004, p. 86). At certain times, however, these boundaries are modified and transgressed, so that conceptual change occurs. The reasons for these changes go beyond the purely linguistic realm and should be sought in social history. Thus, Koselleck continues to point out the complex relationship between conceptual history and social history. While conceptual history performs social history by uncovering concepts that encompass a variety of socio-political circumstances and giving them a unified meaning, social history contains the extra-linguistic keys that would explain the transformations of concepts that cannot be explained on purely semantic grounds.

It is precisely the mutability of concepts that makes them the subject of a historical narrative. This is why, strictly speaking, they are undefinable, for only that which has no history is definable and can be delimited once and for all. The methodology of conceptual history moves between synchronic and diachronic analysis, making visible the "dislocations that exist between words whose meanings are related to a diminishing content and the new contents of the same word" (Koselleck, 2004, p. 90). Thanks to this diachronic review, previously hidden layers of meaning can be revealed. The accumulated layers of meaning often consist of overlapping meanings from different disciplines at different times. The goal of historiographical research is precisely to clarify these layers. For example, Koselleck analyzes the meaning of the concept of *Legitimität*:

> *Legitimität* was first a category in jurisprudence and was subsequently politicized in terms of traditionalism and deployed in inter-party strife. It then took on a historico-theoretical perspective and was colored propagandistically according to the politics of whoever happened to be using the expression. All such overlapping meanings existed at the time when the term was scientifically neutralized by Max Weber, making it possible to establish typologies of forms of domination. He thus extracted from the available reserve of possible meanings a scientific concept (Koselleck, 2004, p. 92).

Unlike Rorty et al., I do not believe that the historian of philosophy takes her material from intellectual history and, once that is done, has nothing more to do with intellectual history. I

argue that the historian of philosophy needs to be an intellectual historian at the same time, and can use the methodology of conceptual history when she is searching for concepts that have multiple layers of meaning. The fact is that, in many cases, once the historian of philosophy has identified philosophical problems and concepts within the broader field of intellectual history, her work still remains tied to intellectual history in the sense that the philosophical meanings of concepts bear traces of meanings from other disciplines in earlier contemporary periods or of the same age. Contrary to what was once believed, it is now accepted that intellectual history and conceptual history are not incompatible approaches (Richter, 1990; Burke, 2010, p. 151-155). Thus, the historian of philosophy can combine conceptual history with the linguistic - contextualist component of intellectual history when the topic under study merits it.

The early modern philosophical concept of the law of nature is a clear example of this. In the seventeenth century, many authors conceived of the laws of nature as imposed by a legislating God. This meaning links the concept of natural law to theology, jurisprudence, and moral philosophy, in which the idea of a legislating God played a central role. In order to interpret the early modern philosophical concept of law of nature and to understand how it was intended to solve the metaphysical and epistemological problems of early modern natural philosophy, the historian of philosophy should take into account the concepts developed in these disciplines. All these meanings from antiquity and the Middle Ages, as well as from non-philosophical disciplines, overlap in the early modern concept of laws of nature; they are its layers of meaning. As in Koselleck's example of the concept of *Legitimät*, the early modern concept of the laws of nature overlaps theological, legal, and moral meanings accumulated throughout the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance periods. In the early modern period, however, the concept had a philosophical character, insofar as it was part of theories designed to solve metaphysical and epistemological questions that were central to seventeenth-century natural philosophy.

History of philosophy and intellectual history

We can say that "philosophical" is not only what we, within a linguistically, temporally and locally situated community, regard as such today. What is also "philosophical" is what was regarded as such by actors in a community in the past that is no longer the same as ours. A contextual historical approach to the past, open to the ways in which philosophy was understood in earlier times, allows us to discover the great plasticity of the philosophical. It shows that certain problems that interested philosophers of the past have at some point ceased to be part of philosophy in order to move to other disciplines that were formerly part of it. For example, the problem of explaining the physical motions of living beings, which Descartes explained by appealing to the

concept of animal spirits, now occupies the biological sciences. Today, the historical study of this subject is usually considered part of the history of science, but since at other stages of history biology was integrated into philosophy, the concept of animal spirits is also part of the history of natural philosophy. The abovementioned concepts of nail and nitre are further examples of this. The image proposed by John Austin (1961, p. 180), according to which, in the history of human research, philosophy takes the place of an original, seminal and tumultuous central sun that occasionally throws a piece of itself, which, like a kind of cold and well-regulated planet, acquires the status of a science, is appropriate if it is taken in a broad sense - as Austin seems to suggest in relation to the birth of a science of language detached from philosophy, together with the collaboration of other disciplines such as grammar.

On the other hand, some concepts that were once the exclusive heritage of philosophy are now shared with other disciplines. For example, the concepts of self and desire are now studied by psychology, while sovereignty, property and freedom are the subject of political science. It would be a mistake, however, to think that philosophy is only a supplier to other disciplines and receives nothing from them. In fact, philosophy is often nourished by other disciplines, either by importing and reworking concepts from them (e.g. the concept of law from jurisprudence or theology), or by incorporating new debates and problems from them (e.g. the topics covered today by philosophy of information and communication, philosophy of the environment, etc.). This bidirectional circulation and adaptation of concepts and problems from philosophy to other disciplines and from other disciplines to philosophy is another sign of the plasticity of the philosophical.

Historical research shows not only that the boundaries of philosophy are constantly shifting, but also that there are no clearly defined boundaries separating philosophy from other intellectual fields. Thus, there are no "purely philosophical concepts", simply because there is no such thing as a "chemically pure" philosophy, "uncontaminated" by extra-philosophical elements. Disciplinary boundaries are diffuse and shifting. As a result, philosophical reflections, past and present, are intertwined with reflections from other disciplines. Throughout history, the catalogue of disciplines closest to philosophy has varied. Whereas in the early modern period philosophy was closely linked to theology, the natural sciences, and law, among others, today it is also linked to political science, social and cultural studies, neurobiology, genetics, and so on. Given this close relationship that philosophy has had and has with many other disciplines, I believe that the history of philosophy should be treated within the broader field of intellectual history. I use intellectual history here not in the sense of the Cambridge school, but in a slightly broader sense. I think of it

as a contextually oriented study of what the intellectuals of a given period were concerned with, without assuming a strict demarcation between different disciplines[5].

My sense of contextualism has not taken the line of the Cambridge School of intellectual history, mainly because I disagree with the assumption of the continuity of a "hard core" inherent in ideas that would make them recognizable as the same over time, and because I also believe that the perfect recovery of a past author's intention in its linguistic context, unbiased by the prejudices and interests of the historian, is an unattainable goal. Instead, I take contextualism in a very broad sense as an approach that searches for the social, political, and cultural contexts of authors, the relations of domination that permeate its historical moment at the global and local level, their personal biographies and interests, the institutional and material setting of their intellectual productions, and the connections across disciplinary boundaries. However, even from a contextualist perspective, when researching the past, historians cannot isolate themselves from their own present context (their language, intellectual and cultural categories, etc.).

My view of intellectual history does not assume that philosophy is something that can be separated from the other disciplines. Philosophy is always connected to other branches of learning, so it cannot really be separated from intellectual history. In this case, the identity of the history of philosophy within the broader field of intellectual history lies in the fact that this form of intellectual history focuses on the philosophical content of past thought, while acknowledging its connections to other intellectual content. Thus, the identity of the history of philosophy is preserved without falling into the error of establishing it, as Rorty et al. did, as a discipline that deals exclusively with "purely philosophical" questions. A historian of philosophy should be an intellectual historian, recognising that philosophy is only one branch of a broader intellectual field. Once they have encountered philosophical problems and the concepts produced to address them, historians of philosophy should continue to engage with other disciplines, as the meanings of such concepts are rarely derived from the field of "pure philosophy". Many components of their meaning are or have been shared with other disciplines. Therefore, the assumption that disciplines are not watertight compartments can be taken as a starting point for investigation.

Towards a philosophy of the history of philosophy

Whatever the reasons why some past philosophical concepts are irrelevant to contemporary philosophical thought, their demise has significant implications. If not all

5 For critical reflections and surveys of the evolution of intellectual history, see Toews (1987), Brett (2002), Vincent (2003), Chaubet (2009), Jay (2011).

philosophical concepts and problems are perennial, then historians of philosophy are dealing with subjects that are relevant to the past but not necessarily to the present. According to Rorty (1984), some philosophers belong to the *Geistesgeschichte* genre of the history of philosophy. For these philosophers, dead philosophical concepts are considered responses to non-genuine problems as opposed to the true, primary, perennial and essential problems of philosophy. These problems are tied to ever-valid, albeit changing, philosophical concepts. These and many other questions are closely linked to the history of philosophy and could, I would suggest, be considered part of the philosophy of the history of philosophy.

My view of the goal of the history of philosophy differs from that of the proponents of *Geistesgechichte*, and also from the view of those who claim that the history of philosophy, in order to be philosophical, must deal with questions relevant to contemporary philosophy. Philosophical is not only what contemporary philosophers and historians of philosophy describe in this way, but also what thinkers of earlier centuries considered to be philosophy. Assuming, once again, that what is philosophical is what people at any given moment said it was, I think that the philosophical character of the history of philosophy lies in studying whatever problems and concepts, arguments and traditions, thinkers of the past considered philosophical. This means that the history of philosophy is relevant: not necessarily relevant to contemporary discussion, but relevant to philosophy itself. In other words, the history of philosophy allows us to know how philosophy was practiced in past centuries, and this makes us aware of how philosophy can be different in different times, places, and cultures.

If the historiography of philosophy tries to justify the philosophical character of historical research by claiming that it is relevant to contemporary philosophy, then a large part of highly valuable history of philosophy would lack legitimacy. The point is that the study of dead philosophical problems and concepts has value in itself and has a philosophical character because it deals with philosophy as it was conceived in the past. I believe that there is in fact no need to apologize for the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy should be to some extent more autonomous from the concerns of contemporary philosophy. In this respect, I agree with Koen Vermeir, who has argued that

> There is no need to be apologetic about doing history. History does not have to serve any utilitarian goal; it is legitimate to be interested in history as such. (The same is true for philosophy, of course). I therefore see no reason to subordinate a historical interest to a philosophical one in the history of philosophy. [...] the 'use of history in philosophy' is subordinate to a philosophical interest, but 'history of philosophy' is mainly driven by a historical interest. The main aim for a historian of philosophy is

> to get the historical story (in which philosophers as well as philosophical texts figure prominently) right. This, however, does not mean that history of philosophy should be uninteresting for philosophers. Even if history of philosophy is not done mainly for philosophical purposes, it does not mean that it cannot be relevant for current philosophical concerns (VERMEIR, 2013, p. 57).

I would like to add that, as various philosophers have claimed, this is not the only way to demonstrate that the history of philosophy is philosophical or philosophically relevant, and therefore has many philosophical values. Based on the previous considerations, I would like to introduce another aspect that may demonstrate an additional philosophical value of the history of philosophy. It highlights the limited lifespan of some philosophical problems and concepts. The history of philosophy raises the question of why certain problems became important or unimportant to philosophers at specific times. This is a philosophical question because it asks about the nature of philosophical problems and the concepts associated with them. In fact, it is a meta-philosophical problem: a problem that asks about the nature of philosophical problems. This question is parallel to, and as important as, the question of why certain perennial questions exist. Are some problems related to an enduring human nature, while contingent problems are products of historical circumstances? Does the limited lifespan of certain problems reflect progress in philosophy, in that some problems have been solved and replaced by new ones? Or does it demonstrate that there is no progress, but rather a succession of futile attempts to solve problems that change as a result of historical circumstances?

To these questions we must add new questions arising from new histories of philosophy written from new perspectives, be they postcolonial, global, or feminist histories of philosophy. Thanks to them, we are learning about past philosophical practices outside the global North and about women philosophers. The philosophical past is populated by other actors and other geographical spaces that have been ignored, silenced, or suppressed by traditional historical narratives for centuries. This historiographical renovation shows that the catalog of supposedly perennial problems pointed out by traditional Western philosophical accounts has been heavily influenced by gender, ethnicity, class, etc. biases that have ignored and dismissed problems that interested other philosophical actors in the same historical period. The result of these historiographical renovations is beginning to show an unprecedented philosophical richness and diversity, stimulating new philosophical problems and new answers to old problems. All this, I think, is a clear sign of the philosophical relevance of the history of philosophy, which constantly opens up new ways of dealing with our most genuine and deepest concerns.

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