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Philosophy and Genealogy: Ways of Writing History of Philosophy

Koen Vermeir

1. Appropriationists versus Contextualists

IT IS COMMON to distinguish between “appropriationist” and “contextualist” versions of the history of philosophy.¹ These would constitute two distinct ways of doing history of philosophy. “Appropriationist” appropriate classical texts for current philosophical needs and interests. “Contextualists” try to understand past philosophers by placing them in their historical context. This distinction is often framed in terms of anachronism, presentism, or historical revisionism. In the first part of this chapter, I will criticize these characterizations of appropriationist and contextualist history of philosophy and I will propose and defend an alternative distinction.

The term “revisionism” has been used to refer to a methodological reform in intellectual history, spearheaded by Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, and John Dunn in the 1960s and 1970s.² Skinner’s principle is taken as the centerpiece of the contextualist point of view: “No agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a

1. See the introduction to this volume. Dan Garber (2005) makes a more fine-grained distinction between his “antiquarian” approach, John McDowell’s “historical mythology” in philosophy, and Jonathan Bennett’s “collegial approach to the history of philosophy.”

2. For the term “revisionism” in this sense, see Tarlton (1973) and Femia (1981). This is different from recent uses of “revision” (and “revisionism”) in historiography, denoting the view that historiography will keep changing over time, depending on changing historians interests, and approaches, which are in their turn embedded in broader cultural, intellectual and social changes (see the December 2007 theme issue of *History and Theory*). The main colloquial use of “revisionism” is of course to refer to those who deny that the Holocaust actually happened.

correct description of what he had meant or done.”³ I find Skinner’s principle rather unintelligible (indeed, it escapes me how I would ever convince a long dead philosopher to accept any statement I make).⁴ Even a generous interpretation of the principle, assuming an imaginary debate between the historian and the historical actor, seems to presuppose what it tries to achieve. In order to decide whether the historian presents a good interpretation of a historical statement, he or she already needs to know what the historical agent would have accepted as a correct description of what he had meant, but this is exactly what Skinner would like to find out in the first place. Furthermore, it does not strike me as the right way to distinguish between “appropriationists” and “contextualists.” The main aim of Skinner’s method as described in his 1969 paper was to recover the intention of the author, an aim that is not necessarily shared by many contextualist historians today.⁵

Anachronism does not seem to be a promising way to distinguish “appropriationists” and “contextualists” either. The use of anachronism, the use of categories or explanatory models alien to the period in question, is not altogether inappropriate in “contextualist” history after all. Nick Jardine argues convincingly that anachronism “is often entirely in order precisely when our interest is, like Skinner’s, in the ‘historical identity’ of deeds and works. Their original historical significances, their meanings in their own times and places, are not confined to the significances that were (or could have been) attached to them at those times and places.”⁶ Jardine works out a series of theoretical and practical guidelines for distinguishing vicious from legitimate anachronism. Richard Evans, for his part, has argued that we often need to use questions and tools from the historian’s present perspective, because this often allows us to read a given source against the grain.⁷ The problem is subtle, and there might well be a distinct difference in degree in the use “appropriationists” and

3. Cf. note 1. For the quotation, see Skinner (1969), 28. Note that Skinner in this classic paper criticizes contextualists as misguided (“social” contextualists, that is, but Skinner does not always make a clear distinction in this paper). See also Boucher (1985) and Tully (1988).

4. This is not meant as a pun, but the “imaginary conversation” approach seems problematic to me. It is also hard to imagine, as Rorty does, that Aquinas would change his mind after reading Newton or Hume. (Rorty 1984), 51. I do not think such imaginations lead to good historiography.

5. For an overview, see Mulligan et al. (1979) and Jardine (2000), 246–53. For Skinner as a contextualist, see, e.g., Diggins (1984), 157. For other detailed criticisms of Skinner’s 1969 paper, see Tarlton (1973) and Femia (1981).

6. Jardine (2000), 252. See also Evans (2000), 92.

7. Evans (2000), 83.

“contextualists” make of anachronism or “vicious anachronism,” yet it is clear that this difference is not absolute.⁸ There is nothing in principle wrong with the use of our concepts and methodologies in the description of the past.⁹

This problem can be taken one step further, to a general problem of understanding, translation, and interpretation of historical material. Philosophers have wondered if it is possible to “understand” a culture or a period in its own terms. Jonathan Bennett has claimed, for instance, that we can only understand past philosophers if “we can say, clearly and in contemporary terms, what his problems were, which of them are still problems, and what contribution they have made towards their solution.”¹⁰ Bennett thus defends the need to translate past statements in contemporary terms and the existence of enduring problems and solutions. Postmodernist philosophers of history have given this view another twist: they would agree with the need to translate past statements, but instead of discovering or interpreting their real meaning, they claim that historians create their own meanings. According to these philosophers, we have no objective access to history. Historiography is only one discourse among many that constructs the past.¹¹ The weaker view, that historiography is more like an art than a science, and that it necessarily involves an imaginative process of re-creating the past, is less controversial. Such views were already central in debates at the start of the twentieth century. Yet the extent of the historians’ involvement in re-creating the past is contentious, and many consider the postmodern stance as too extreme. Again, this might be an issue of degree, but it seems clear that both the so-called appropriationist and contextualist historians of philosophy re-create the past to some extent, and in this process they bring their current concepts to bear on their scholarship.

A similar argument can be made for presentism. Presentism, the interest in the past that stems from contemporary questions and concerns, is perfectly compatible with a contextualist approach. J. G. A. Pocock, together with Skinner at the origin of the “Cambridge school” of “contextualist intellectual history,” studied the history of renaissance republicanism guided by a deep

8. For one, Jardine accuses “contextualist” historians who apply interest theory or Latour’s Actor Network Theory for the early modern period of vicious anachronism.

9. In the introduction to *Philosophy in History*, Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner construct ideal types of historians of philosophy versus intellectual historians but in the end admit that “we might do well to forget the bugbears of ‘anachronism’ and ‘antiquarianism’” (Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner (1984), 10), because no one would fit in the most extreme versions of these positions anyway.

10. See Rorty (1984) 52, n.1.

11. Cf. White (1973), White (1978), Ankersmit (1994).

engagement in and concern for contemporary politics. For those interested in tracing back current political constellations, in order to better understand them, it is not necessary to give up a rigorous contextualist approach. Furthermore, to a certain extent, presentism is unavoidable. If one reads past histories of philosophy or the history of historiography, it quickly becomes clear that these past historians had different focuses, ideologies, concerns, etc., partly due to the times in which they were living and the fashions in which they took part, which played out in the way these historians have written history.¹² In *What Is History?* (1961), E. H. Carr already maintained that history books are products of their own times, and he urged students to study the historians before studying the histories they wrote. Again, therefore, almost all history has a tinge of presentism, and it will be difficult to make clear distinctions between “appropriationist” and “contextualist” history of philosophy in these terms. In all these cases, a “puritan” approach, in which all anachronism and presentism is banned, is impossible. It is also unnecessary and it would probably be uninteresting anyway. What is important is to have criteria that can help historians of philosophy to distinguish in practice between better and worse historical interpretations.

2. History of Philosophy versus Philosophical Uses of History

I would like to introduce the distinction I am aiming at by making a comparison with the role of history in the sciences. Alasdair MacIntyre has made the interesting argument that theories in the natural sciences have an essential historical existence. He did not only mean that a scientific theory at time t_1 and at time t_2 are not identical, but also that a scientific theory can only be judged in comparison with its predecessors. “No natural scientific theory is ever vindicated as such; it is vindicated or fails to be vindicated only relative to those of its predecessors with whom it has competed so far.”¹³ This installs an essential historical aspect at the core of scientific development. My point here will be different but related: it is based on the observation that scientists often use history in their pedagogical practices and even in their research.

Apart from the usual short historical accounts that are supposed to enliven science course books, the coursework in many disciplines is structured according to the historical evolution of the discipline. This is partly for institutional

12. Cf. Kelley (1998).

13. MacIntyre (1984), 44.

reasons (educational structures adapt rather slowly to changes in the discipline) but also for pedagogical reasons. This might be most clearly the case in theoretical physics, where students specializing in high energy physics are usually first introduced to classical Newtonian mechanics, then to electromagnetism and Lagrangian and Hamiltonian mechanics, and later, more or less in sequence, to statistical mechanics, quantum mechanics, special relativity, general relativity, particle physics, quantum field theory, and superstring theory. Note that this succession corresponds to an actual historical succession of different “paradigms” in high energy physics. In many other disciplines, the teaching of topics also follows the chronological succession of their discovery to some extent, but on a smaller scale (e.g., within molecular biology, rather than biology as a whole). The point is that it is difficult to understand the basic presuppositions of an advanced theory without a historical narrative that refers to predecessor theories. One of the reasons is that the recent theories are so far removed from everyday experience that it is difficult to make sense of their basic axioms without historical knowledge of why (and in contrast to which theory) these new axioms were proposed. Relativity theory makes little sense without reference to the Michelson-Morley experiment, which itself was inspired by (problems with) theories in electromagnetism and classical mechanics. The idea that the basic constituents of the world are strings in ten or eleven dimensions comes across as unintelligible if one has no prior knowledge about the history of physics.

The way in which scientists use and present history is not professional historiography, of course. Nevertheless, there is an often explicit non-trivial use of history in the sciences. Such uses seem to corroborate MacIntyre’s claim that a successor theory only makes sense in light of predecessor theories, i.e., in a historical perspective. I think we can see the same in philosophy, where certain problems and theories can only be understood in light of a historical lineage. Even analytic philosophy, which presumes a break with the past, often needs its *own* history, referring back to formulations by, e.g., Frege, Gettier, or Tarski, to make the latest philosophical presuppositions, problems, and answers intelligible, and to determine what counts as interesting problems and solutions. What is important here are structural relationships between theories, not the actual histories as they came about. Rational reconstructions therefore suffice, and these sometimes even degenerate in mythological history.¹⁴ MacIntyre sees writing such histories as a desideratum, even for historians of philosophy, it seems.¹⁵ The authors of such histories often care little

14. Cf. the case studied by Waugh and Ariew in this volume.

15. MacIntyre (1984), 47.

whether their historical account is correct, as long as it clarifies their current theoretical positions. Even if the authors do not care much, such myths should be debunked if false, because they are still presented as history (and not as myth). As such, they abuse and pervert the intuition that historical insight contributes to the understanding of contemporary problems. Furthermore, such myths can lead to a mistaken view of current problems (philosophical and other) because history can shed light on current problems if applied correctly. Even if some philosophers only “use” history, they should be careful to use it correctly, if they present it as “history”. The histories MacIntyre desires to be written are the mythological and potted histories constructed by the scientists or philosophers themselves, and they have little *historical* interest.

Science, it is often assumed, does not have a historical consciousness. Previous theories that are rejected are quickly forgotten. Yet sometimes false old theories retain certain relevance. As a typical example, classical mechanics is still useful, especially in applied science and engineering (where the utilitarian aspect prevails over the truth aspect). It is less well known that there are still many unresolved problems in classical mechanics, and some professional scientists today spend their careers researching these. Even if classical mechanics is technically speaking “false,” this does not mean it is irrelevant or uninteresting, even for a current day theoretical physicist. Again, I think this compares to the use of history in philosophy. Many of Descartes’s propositions are superseded, but some of the problems he raised are still relevant (within certain constraints or with some adaptations) and pose still interesting problems for philosophers today. Maybe this is more the case in philosophy than in the sciences, but I do not think that they are essentially different in this respect. Both philosophy and the sciences have problems that seem superseded (e.g., about substantial form or occult qualities)¹⁶ and others (about the mind-body problem, or the passions) that are still relevant.¹⁷

What these uses of history in philosophy or in the sciences have in common is that they are not about how (past) philosophy or science really worked. The subject matter under investigation remains “being” or “knowledge” in

16. Of course, these judgments are always open to reassessment. Aristotelian views on organisms have recently been resurrected by philosophers of biology, for instance.

17. It is true that Newton is less read by scientists than Descartes is by philosophers (although most philosophers still encounter Descartes only through rational reconstructions, like scientists get to know Newton mechanics). This may be due to a difference in reception of technical notation (Newton’s way of writing is less well preserved than Descartes’s way of writing), as well as a difference in the history of the historiography of philosophy as compared to the history of the historiography of science (they had a different institutional embedding and were used differently in pedagogical practice).

the case of metaphysics and epistemology, for instance, and “nature” in the case of the sciences. The interest is in the object of science or philosophy, not in science or philosophy *in se*. It is clear therefore that the use of history in science or philosophy remains firmly embedded in the practice of science or philosophy. In contrast, the history of science has science itself as its object, and I think it is fair to say that, similarly, the history of philosophy should have philosophy itself as its object. The history of philosophy is a historical inquiry into *philosophy*, not into “being” or “knowledge.” Traditionally, the focus of the history of philosophy has been on philosophical texts, but this seems a rather limited interpretation of “philosophy.” I think it is an evident and fruitful challenge for the history of philosophy, in analogy to the history of science, to take the full richness of the practice of philosophy as a subject matter, including practices of philosophizing (writing, reading, acting, philosophical engagement in the world), institutions, social structures, material culture, and, of course, the resulting philosophical texts.¹⁸

The difference between the use of history in philosophy and the history of philosophy is thus not a question of anachronism or presentism; rather, they have a different object that is of interest, and their practice is adapted to this interest.¹⁹ The practices of the former are philosophical, while the practices of the latter are historical. This does not preclude the possibility that the latter involves philosophical practices as well, of course, and in order to do good history of philosophy (e.g., interpreting past philosophical texts), the historian of philosophy needs considerable philosophical skill. Furthermore, I think these two approaches are in general characterized by a different way of understanding: while the first is more systematic in orientation, the second is more characterized by what I would call a “genealogical” understanding.²⁰ In trying to understand why things are as they are, both ask different questions. The philosopher wonders how phenomena or concepts are interrelated with other phenomena and concepts. The historian, in contrast, asks how these phenomena or concepts have come into being. It has been common to frame this distinction as the difference between looking for “reasons” and looking for “causes.” I think this dichotomy is not very useful, as historians are interested in more than just causes. What is also important to note in this respect,

18. For importing methods from the history of science into the history of philosophy, see also Justin E. H. Smith in this volume.

19. Of course, there are more interesting philosophical uses of history than the one I mentioned above. See, e.g., Williams (2002) and even Craig (1999).

20. I will not go into a comparison with the “genealogical” project of Foucault and Nietzsche.

however, is that reasons can be causes. A past philosopher might have had many reasons to perform certain acts (including writing or defending a certain position) but these reasons are only effective when they become causes. What interests the historian are those reasons that caused the past philosopher to act, insofar as a historian is interested in actuality (in what actually happened) and not so much in possibility (what would have happened if ...). Indeed, it is with such reasons that the historian of philosophy will usually be confronted, looking at how different reasons (understood in their historical context) have caused philosophers to develop and change their theories.

In the second part of this chapter, I will address the interest or relevance of this kind of history of philosophy. Is it “mere history” and does it necessarily abandon the aim of making a positive contribution to current philosophy?²¹

3. Genealogies and Sameness

To start with, I would like to stress that there is an intrinsic irreducible and autonomous *historical* interest. 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.²² (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.²³ To the contrary, in the light of the distinction I argued for earlier, 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. It is such kind of supplementary relevance that I will explore in what follows.

21. See the introduction to this volume.

22. For a spirited defense, see, e.g., Tollebeck and Verschaffel (1992); but see Henkes (1993) for a criticism of their position.

23. One could argue that in contrast to the history of science, the history of philosophy is still insufficiently professionalized, in that it has not been able to separate itself enough from its object of study, philosophy. The history of science used to be practiced in science departments, but this has now become the exception. Historians of science now work in independent departments (sometimes in alliance with philosophers or sociologists of science) or belong to history departments. This institutional (in)dependence also has consequences for the dominance of historical versus philosophical/scientific interests.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will address the specific question of what kind of history of philosophy is *philosophically* relevant, without it jeopardizing its historical accuracy.²⁴ My answer neither precludes that other kinds of history can be interesting nor does it rule out that other kinds of philosophy are valuable. Nevertheless, I will restrict myself here to the theme of the volume, and I will argue that a genealogical approach is the most promising methodology for the history of philosophy if the historian of philosophy wants it to be relevant for current day philosophers. Indeed, genealogy shows that there is no gap between the present and the past. We are all part of history, and therefore, philosophers today are part of the history of philosophy (whether they want it or not). A genealogical study aims at showing this and at drawing consequences from it. In particular, a genealogical history of philosophy, in showing how current philosophical concepts, theories, and practices actually come into being, will be the most interesting for present day philosophers.

The questions asked and the way of understanding proposed in a genealogical approach are different from the way this is done in systematic philosophy, but nevertheless, the answers this approach can deliver may be very useful for philosophy. A historical account may shed new light on current concepts, theories, and problems and may even show alternatives.²⁵ It is not about a “comparison” between, e.g., early modern and twenty-first-century problems or theories (such a comparison might be more a projection of the historian than a real relation between the two periods), but a genealogical account that traces the actual evolution of concepts and theories and makes clear how the current conceptual schemes came about. Of course, this does not deliver the philosopher a straightforward philosophical justification or rejection of these schemes, but it gives us a causal story that sheds a different kind of light on the problem, which a contemporary philosopher might find useful. This approach comprises one way of heeding Wittgenstein’s advice that philosophy should be therapeutic and should solve problems of language. Since language is historical, and since concepts have been developed for particular reasons in specific contexts, these past uses will still affect our current uses.²⁶ It is through

24. One could of course also ask the question which kinds of history of philosophy are interesting for *historians*, but this would be a different topic.

25. Cf. Taylor (1984).

26. Even if one accepts the existence of some instances of “total discontinuity” in the way a concept is deployed at different points in history, it is important to identify these historical moments and to trace the genealogical development from there. But it is equally important to understand how and why these discontinuities occurred, and in order to do that, one will

a genealogical study that these relations can be brought to light. A historical account therefore seems essential to such a therapeutic enterprise.

One example of such a genealogy of concepts and practices up till today is Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's recent study of "objectivity," which deals in particular with how objectivity is represented in scientific atlases. They express the force of the genealogical approach as follows: "A study like this one should ultimately shed light on the grand epistemological visions and moral anxieties now associated with scientific objectivity.... It may also be possible to unravel the conceptual tangle of the current meanings of objectivity. If the concept grew historically, by gradual accretion and extension from practices, it is not so surprising that its structure is confused rather than crystalline."²⁷ They stress the importance of practices, but the same could be said about concepts and ideas, of course, and the result would not necessarily be more "crystalline." As a project in history of philosophy, instead of scientific atlases, one could study how objectivity was conceptualized by philosophers through the ages, as part of broader knowledge practices. One could then also inquire into how this genealogy still affects current philosophical debates on objectivity (something Daston and Galison do not address).²⁸

It is still rare to explore the history of philosophy by treating philosophy as a practice. I think philosophers could be more open to this approach. The object of the history of philosophy is past philosophy as a whole. Crucial questions therefore are: What is past philosophy? How did it work? The history of philosophy should inform us about the practices of past philosophy, and even if "philosophy" is not a natural kind or does not have an essence, past philosophy is still relevant for philosophy today. Because, again, philosophy today is part of a genealogy and is linked to past philosophy, studying the history of philosophy will make philosophy more self-reflexive.²⁹ Someone trained in analytic epistemology might think philosophy is preeminently concerned with truth and follows a clearly delineated method in this pursuit;

have to understand the earlier genealogy of the concept, historical conditions, and the historical contexts at the time, and how all these interacted to generate this putative discontinuity. Discontinuities do not come out of nowhere and are not necessarily unintelligible. They too should be understood and analyzed by means of a historiographical methodology.

27. Daston and Galison (2007), 53.

28. Early modern philosophy does not just consist of different theories but also of different practices (e.g., disputation), different aims (e.g., the good life), etc. One could (and should) incorporate these practices as well as the material culture, interactions with the sciences and wider culture, etc.

29. Garber (2005) explores one kind of such reflexivity.

a confrontation with the history of philosophy might make him aware of other aims and other methods (e.g., the good life versus conceptual analysis or the method of intuitions).³⁰ Furthermore, a genealogical story might make the student understand why analytic philosophy took a different approach, for intrinsic as well as contextual factors. It might make him wonder if the same contextual conditions are still valid, and if current analytic philosophy has succeeded in its aims.³¹

In contrast to Daston and Galison, authors such as Jonathan Israel mainly focus on ideas, an approach closer to the stock-in-trade of the philosopher. Israel starts from a strong political engagement and belief in the values of the Enlightenment, but he is absolutely convinced that genealogy—how the Enlightenment came into being—is crucial for understanding what it is and how the project of the Enlightenment can be advanced today. This does not necessarily lead him to do bad history (although a “genealogy” of such a complex phenomenon comes across as somewhat naive, despite the almost 3,000 pages Israel devotes in his trilogy to the genealogy of the Enlightenment).³² It is commonly accepted that current views of modernity and Enlightenment are tributary to the French Revolution, but Israel aims to show that the genealogy runs further back, to Spinoza and to what he calls the “Radical Enlightenment.” He also thinks that we can draw lessons from this genealogy that can help us to address contemporary problems. Israel presents an interesting approach, but this does not mean that everyone should start doing such *longue durée* studies, of course. Israel’s work clearly shows the possibilities but also the limits of what one can achieve with these kinds of genealogy.³³ Nevertheless, the writings of an individual historian fit in a broader discipline, which as a whole spans all of history, and the individual historian’s work therefore contributes to and belongs to a genealogical project.

Several contributions to this volume also use a genealogical approach to describe the historical development of philosophical ideas and practices. Eric Schliesser and Michael Della Rocca, for instance, follow similar genealogical

30. E.g., Hadot (1995).

31. See, e.g., Della Rocca and Schliesser in this volume.

32. Israel (2001); Israel (2006); Israel (2011). I am here not entering into particular criticisms against Israel’s work.

33. Israel’s aim was very ambitious, especially because the enlightenment is such a complex phenomenon, and a genealogy of one problem or concept, for instance, seems a more manageable enterprise.

strategies in looking for the origins of analytic philosophy. Schliesser goes back to Ernest Nagel, analyzing the problems of this original position and offering a “counter-history of analytic philosophy” embodied in the work of Schlick as a possible genealogical therapy. Della Rocca similarly goes back to the origins of analytic philosophy—in his case, the discussion between Russell, Moore, and Bradley, as a result of which the method of intuition came to dominate the field. When we revisit this original moment, we can find a diagnostic of the current ills of philosophy, or so they claim. We are still part of a long story, in which central decisions and directions were chosen a long time ago, and we can revisit these basic choices in order to renew current philosophical practice. The article in this volume written by Delphine Kolesnik-Antoine shows the importance of studying the genealogy of the historiography of philosophy, a historiography that is institutionalized in the teaching curricula, and of which we are the direct inheritors. The history of the reception and interpretation of past philosophers still affects current schools or traditions in philosophy, as well as our personal understanding of these philosophers.

Even if the possibility of writing a full-fledged genealogy might be an illusion, I do think most historians and especially historians of philosophy assume that there is such a genealogical connection to the past they study. It is usually because of this genealogical connection (or by a reconstruction of this genealogical lineage) that philosophers got interested in the work of a past philosopher in the first place.³⁴ Philosophers are part of a community of scholars and their work is part of larger historiographical framework within which it gets its meaning. Is this genealogical approach a kind of appropriation of history? Not really. History does not have to be written with a utilitarian purpose in

34. This argument seems to render world history problematic. It seems that the past of alien cultures can only be approached through some knowledge and interaction with the contemporary alien culture. The “western” orientation of history of philosophy seems to confirm the interest in one’s “own” genealogy, especially if one wants to draw conclusions from it relevant for current philosophy. This is changing now that our knowledge of intercultural contacts and circulation of knowledge becomes more detailed, and we learn that our “own” past has never been as isolated as we might think. Indeed, the history of historiography shows how the interest of historians has long been guided by an ethnocentric genealogy. Evans (2000), 178, cites a number of historians who until the 1990s claimed that Africa had no history and that writing the history of Asia was impossible. John Vincent wrote “We do not understand Asia and will not need to” (*ibid.*). Evans correctly remarks that the changing balance of global economic power will quickly make such views obsolete, again indicating the importance of changes in the present for the changing evaluations by historians of what counts as interesting (or even possible) research topics.

mind in order to be interesting and useful (often in for the author unexpected ways). Genealogical history can be executed out of a purely historical interest; it can be historically accurate and of philosophical relevance.

On the one hand, genealogical writing might lead to historiographical pitfalls. In particular, one should avoid a teleological historiography of precursors and anticipations. Also, the vague notion of influence should be shunned, as it makes historians postulate relations without good grounds. Indeed, all these concepts represent a historiography based on dubious notions of historical causality. The aim of looking for origins can be similarly flawed, if executed uncritically. Usually only a few origins or a few founding figures are identified, which results in a reductive historical picture that denies the richness of historical causation. The search for origins often gives a distorted view of the past, if one selects just a few elements as relevant for the later historical developments one is interested in, ignoring the rich historical context that would help us to better understand the past.³⁵ Genealogical histories tend to fit everything in a rather linear narrative, and also this should be avoided.³⁶

Finally, the metaphor of “genealogy” should not be taken too strictly. Even if we can talk about a relationship that binds two historical events, there are many possibly relevant lineages. Drawings of the genealogy of species show an origin and lines that are branching out. The genealogical figures that trace back a person’s forefathers show a similar network that extends in the other direction. Both representations are of course partial (and depend on the point of interest). A historical genealogy is also infinitely more complex. Unlike offspring (of sexual reproduction), which has only two parents, historical events can have many relevant causes, substantially complicating the picture. Genealogies do not need to fall into these pitfalls. Furthermore, even if historians are motivated to study a certain period because of its genealogical relevance, they should still explore this past era in a wider perspective, bringing in different contemporary contexts, in order to arrive at a better understanding of crucial past moments.

On the other hand, genealogies have a very important function in historical research. They are very helpful, even necessary, to make historical

35. The precursor approach is very much present in the history of technology. In my own work on the magic lantern, which is generally conceived of as the origin of the movie projector, I have argued that such an approach misses the richness of instruments, their aims and variations at the time. Of course, when Christiaan Huygens first conceived of the magic lantern in 1662, he did not envision it as the forerunner of the movie projector. See Vermeir (2005), 128.

36. Daston and Galison (2007) have tried to avoid this, but have only partly succeeded. See also Daston and Park (1998), 10–11, and the difference with Park and Daston (1981).

interpretation possible. The existence of a genealogical connection is the main methodological difference between anthropology and history. This indicates that the problem of interpretation and the kind of relevance of historical work is different from that of anthropology. An anthropologist can interact with the culture under study, creating shared practices (or “trading zones”), which is crucial for his interpretative efforts. This, of course, is impossible for historians. (The “conversation” imagined by Rorty and others only goes one way. Even if you recognize some kind of “resistance” in the text, this is still not a conversation.) Historians are, however, in contact with their past in virtue of a genealogical connection. Their past is not entirely alien for them, because they know that they are historically connected to it. This is a crucial advantage for historical interpretation, and it is one of the main tools for avoiding vicious anachronisms. As Jardine puts it: “When seeking entry points for interpretation of bafflingly alien works and deeds, [we should] look for specific traditions of practices linking them to us, rather than postulating common ground at the level of supposed human universals,”³⁷ or, as I would put it more generally, rather than postulating unfounded similarities.

4. Genealogies and Difference

The true-blue historian is interested in the strangeness of history. It is exactly in this “strangeness” that history shows itself irreducible to current concerns. By studying the strange aspects of history, the historian can display his disciplinary autonomy. In contrast, the historian of philosophy (and philosophers even more) seems more interested in sameness, i.e. in problems in the past that resemble current problems, or that at least are at the origin of current problems. A little strangeness can be interesting, because it confronts the historian of philosophy with something unexpected, with historical resistance, from which he can learn. Too much strangeness is unwelcome, however (historians of philosophy are usually not interested in the history of witchcraft or vampirism). Strange are those things that were not handed on, what fell out of the canon, the dead branches in the genealogy that cannot be traced to the present day and therefore seem of little interest.

In what follows, I want to indicate that even the strangeness of history can be interesting and relevant to philosophers today. A first thing that the strangeness of history can show us is that the perceived “sameness” of history is often a construction. (Of course, strangeness can also be a construction,

37. Jardine (2000), 266.

especially in romantic accounts of history, similar to orientalism, which stressed the strangeness in other cultures, but, as already indicated, this is usually not the problem in history of philosophy.)³⁸ Recently, a philosopher colleague expressed his conviction that past philosophers, such as Aristotle, were much more intelligible than other past writers. Hacking too writes about the immediate intelligibility of Descartes for his students and his own shared sensibilities with Leibniz.³⁹ The past *is* different, however, and the strangeness of history shows this. Aristotle, Descartes, and Leibniz are not our contemporaries. A genealogical study of the *reception* of Aristotle, Descartes, and Leibniz will show that a lot of effort went into keeping or making these philosophers intelligible. Would Aristotle be intelligible were it not for long-lasting and strong traditions, continuing over centuries, interpreting and reinterpreting Aristotle? The latest commentaries, such as the work by John Cooper, make Aristotle more familiar for us, but Cooper too is the heir of a long tradition of reinterpretation.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the prominence of some of these schools (in certain historical periods) have diffused their reinterpretations of Aristotle's ideas into general intellectual culture, making it into a more general cultural heritage.⁴¹ It is this continuous reinterpretation by historians of philosophy, different ways of reading, the changing curricula and textbooks that expounded canons of past philosophers, the methods and institutions that standardized questions, answers, and meanings (e.g., the *sophismata*), as well as a (relative) omnipresence in general cultural life, that should be studied. Such a study of reception will show that all these efforts have kept the thought of past philosophers more accessible and familiar to us than other ideas from the past. The modernity of Descartes is the result of a lot of work by generations of philosophers and historians of philosophy.⁴²

There are more benefits to studying the strangeness of history. The strangeness of the past also creates wonder (the basic passion of philosophy, according to Aristotle!). This alienation prompts us to put into question a number

38. E.g., Said (1978).

39. Hacking (1984).

40. See Kolesnik-Antoine, this volume.

41. Even if it might seem that Avicenna does not make Aristotle much more familiar for us today, Avicenna played a crucial role in the medieval reception of Aristotle in the West. He is therefore a central figure in the genealogical reception story, and our current interpretations might still owe a lot to him, even if mediated through centuries of other reinterpretations.

42. See also the chapter by Kolesnik-Antoine, where she shows how historians of philosophy fit in past philosophers into the general background beliefs of dominant contemporary schools (e.g., spiritualism in the case of Cousin).

of basic attitudes, presuppositions, and concepts. Furthermore, the fact that something comes across as strange today does not mean that it did not have a crucial role in the past. It might have affected in an important way the course of history, and therefore the genealogy of our ideas and concepts. Charles Taylor has argued for studying origins of philosophical problems in order to open the black box.⁴³ Studying origins (but keeping in mind the possible pitfalls described earlier) allows us to see how these problems came into being, why they were formulated as they were, and what alternatives there may be that are not immediately available to us today. Nothing guarantees that these alternatives can be easily assimilated in our own conceptual schemes, however. As a matter of fact, because these are the “lost” options in history, which fell out of the genealogy, they might come across as rather strange, but that does not mean that they are therefore less important to understand.

Finally, I would like to argue not only for the importance of history of philosophy but for a broader vision of history with a philosophical sensibility and relevance (this could include crossovers between history of philosophy and other kinds of histories, or even history that uses philosophy).⁴⁴ I think protracted debates about the identity of history of philosophy are not very interesting or fruitful (usually, they are performed rather for institutional reasons than for intrinsic reasons). Furthermore, the idea of philosophy as an unworldly and isolated enterprise is itself only a rather recent historical construction.⁴⁵ We should instead be open to other approaches to the history of intellectual life, culture, and philosophical practice. One version of such a way of writing history with crossover potential and with a philosophical sensibility is historical epistemology. I already mentioned *Objectivity* by Daston and Galison, but there are many different *currents* in historical epistemology.⁴⁶ At a conference in Berlin, Lorraine Daston has attempted to characterize the difference between (her kind of) historical epistemology and the history of epistemology as follows.⁴⁷ Historical epistemology is the emergence and articulation of new epistemological categories and problems

43. Taylor (1984).

44. Cf. Chartier (2009), chapter 10, for some possible interactions between history and philosophy.

45. Something similar holds for natural philosophers; see, e.g., Schaffer (2009).

46. See, e.g., the recent conferences at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Columbia University, and Leuven University, as well as symposia and seminar series in Nancy and Paris, exploring the different strands in historical epistemology.

47. For other policing and demarcation attempts by Daston, however, see Daston (2009).

out of knowledge practices. She opposes this to the history of epistemology, which is the history of philosophical theories, or more generally, the history of reflections, both philosophical and scientific, on the ways of acquiring and justifying knowledge.⁴⁸ As I have argued, history of philosophy can (and should) incorporate this focus on practices (although it would be a stretch to ask it to incorporate all kinds of scientific practices). Ideally, I think historical epistemology and the history of epistemology would in practice have large areas of overlap and collaboration. Indeed, there might remain some difference of focus, because of the different objects under study, but more interaction seems to be a desideratum.

I now want to take up a very different example, a more extreme case, because it shows more clearly the limits of interpretation and historiography. In his magisterial *Thinking with Demons*, Stuart Clark has applied “postmodern” philosophy to the history of witchcraft and demonology.⁴⁹ Maybe surprisingly for some, the result is interesting and successful.⁵⁰ Clark’s problem was how to write the history of witchcraft or demonology if you do not want to simply reject the ideas of the people you study as false or even as nonsensical? Taking recourse to the “linguistic turn” popular in the 1990s (without desiring to take sides in the philosophical controversy), he took the work on “discourse” as a tool for his own historical aims. In this case, he applied the idea that signifiers did not need to refer to any real signified to make sense, but that only its differences with other signifiers were relevant.⁵¹ He decided to treat all beliefs on the same par with this methodology, and the difference between what he considered physical possibilities and impossibilities became irrelevant. I find Clark’s philosophical struggle with his recalcitrant historical material enlightening and the resulting book is highly readable and interesting. One striking result: it turns out that witchcraft discourse was very much preoccupied with issues of language and signs, which makes

48. Lorraine Daston’s comment at the conference *What (Good) Is Historical Epistemology?*, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, July 24–26, 2008.

49. See Clark (1997).

50. In particular, Clark stresses the importance of the “linguistic turn” as well as an anti-realist approach for his work in the preface and chapter 1 of his book. Evans (2000), 307, calls Clark’s approach “explicitly postmodernist.” The Lévi-Straussian title refers to his (post-) structuralist interests and in particular to his treatment of demonology as an intellectual resource. Clark (1997), viii.

51. For a more extreme application of these ideas to witchcraft, see Maggi (2001), 226, who uses de Certeau and Lacan as points of departure, focusing on “discourse” (quoting Vattimo: “there are no facts, only interpretations”) and mingling history, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and philosophy.

his approach even more appropriate. In fact, the concern with language at the time of the witch craze was not rivaled until the linguistic turn in the twentieth century.

It is part of the cultural historian's sensibility not to take sides too easily (and it is maybe an inheritance of postmodernism that some historians prefer to take sides with marginalized groups or beliefs rather than with the mainstream). Historians usually try to judge the beliefs and actions of the actors according to their context. Even if some contemporaries denounced witchcraft beliefs as nonsense, this does not mean that these beliefs were unreasonable in the context of the time. We know that witchcraft beliefs are not alien to early modern philosophers (e.g., Henry More and Robert Boyle, to name only two), something historians of philosophy will have to learn to deal with. Furthermore, some early modern philosophical views may be considered even more outlandish than witchcraft beliefs (and they certainly were for contemporaries; e.g., Spinoza comes in mind). A historical sensibility urges philosophers to come to terms with this strangeness of the past.

To conclude this section, I also want to raise the issue of the strangeness of the present. Not only early modern philosophical views can be compared with witchcraft beliefs, but also some current philosophical views fall for some of us in the same category of "strangeness." In contrast to the sciences, where there is widespread consensus over many issues, this is a far cry from the situation in philosophy. Many philosophical debates, often originating in the early modern period or even earlier, are not yet closed. This poses specific problems for the history of philosophy. Rorty dismissed such concerns as unfounded:

We take the pardonable ignorance of great dead scientists for granted. We should be equally willing to say that Aristotle was unfortunately ignorant that there are no such things as real essences, or Leibniz that God does not exist, or Descartes that the mind is just the central nervous system under an alternative description. We hesitate merely because we have colleagues who are themselves ignorant of such facts, and whom we courteously describe not as "ignorant," but as "holding different philosophical views." Historians of science have no colleagues who believe in crystalline spheres, or who doubt Harvey's account of circulation, and they are thus free from such constraints. There is nothing wrong with self-consciously letting our own philosophical views dictate terms in which to describe the dead.⁵²

52. Rorty (1984), 49–50.

History of science has changed since Rorty wrote this article. It is not common practice anymore to call Galen “ignorant” and to let our own views dictate the terms in which to describe past scientists. Especially in the case of philosophy, where the current perspective is dispersed rather than being in consensus, it would be inappropriate for the historian of philosophy to impose one’s own perspective not only on the historical actors but also on one’s readers.⁵³

The question is, however, whether we can really avoid imposing our perspective. Can we really write a history in which possibilities and impossibilities are irrelevant? If we want to go beyond just describing discourses, can we describe a witch flying to the Sabbath as an action that happened in the past? A recent trend in the history of science has replicated experiments from the past, in order to learn more about the practices of experimentation, the materials alchemists, natural philosophers and scientists used, the problems they encountered (but did not write down).⁵⁴ This approach has been very successful, sometimes with remarkable results. Larry Principe has replicated alchemical experiments on the transmutation of gold, for instance, and was able to show that the procedures jotted down by the alchemists were not merely symbolic, religious, or psychological expressions, but represented real chemical reactions.⁵⁵ In these cases, however, we assume that we have a non-textual access to these past practices and that we share to a large extent the same world and experiences. This approach, which seems promising, is opposite to the discourse analysis proposed by Clark, because it is very much concerned about “real” possibilities and impossibilities. Principe was careful, however, not to go to the end of the experiment. The procedures became vaguer and could not be interpreted so easily anymore. If he had been able to push the experiments to the end, would he have arrived at the transmutation of gold (which would have put him in an awkward spot with his chemist colleagues) or should he have concluded that the procedures in the end were nonsense or fraud (something he wants to avoid as a historian sensitive to the worldview of

53. Historical difference also shows the limits of the dialogical approach, or the idea of a conversation with the past. Of course, a lot of wisdom can be gained by such imaginary conversations. But such approaches belong rather to the philosophical *use* of history than to the history of philosophy proper.

54. See Sibum (1995).

55. See Principe (2000).

the actors he studies)? Principe's *own* position on alchemy would become important in his historical analysis, something he has so far avoided doing as a historian.⁵⁶

One can wonder if not only this specific method used in the history of science, but all historical writing, is in the end not anchored in the life world and the beliefs of the historian, how much he might try to erase them, and that in some cases, these will come to the fore. A contemporary witch or astrologer writing the history of witchcraft or astrology does this in a very different fashion from that used by academic historians. Would it be so different for different kinds of philosophers?⁵⁷ We should be clear that our basic presuppositions about the world are not necessarily shared with the historical actors, and maybe not even with our contemporary colleagues and readers. For taking into account all these sensibilities, reflection on *ways of writing* the history of philosophy becomes important.⁵⁸

5. Conclusion

The question I have tried to answer in this chapter is how history of philosophy can still be relevant for philosophy, after giving up the timelessness of philosophical problems and truths as well as the ideal of a conversation with the past. After the necessary caveats (that there can be other fruitful ways of doing history of philosophy, which do not necessarily answer to historical accuracy or philosophical relevance) I have argued that for an authentic history of philosophy, which takes the demands of both history and philosophy seriously, a genealogical approach seems to be the most fruitful way to go. Such a genealogy, if it avoids a number of typical pitfalls, is historically accurate, ambitious, and challenging, and is at the same time relevant for the present. Everything is in history, and the present will be history in an instant. Even the future can only be thought of in terms of the present and the past. It seems therefore inconceivable that history would not be relevant to philosophy.

56. I explored these themes in the workshop *Questioning "Occult Sciences,"* June 16, 2010, in Paris and a talk "Reconstruction and Re-enactment in the History of Science and Technology" on October 14, 2011, in Brussels.

57. See Lührman (1989) for an interesting sociology of contemporary witchcraft. She showed that many contemporary witches are actually highly educated professionals, including engineers, physicians, and (who knows?) maybe even some professional philosophers.

58. For some reflections on narrativity, writing, and history, see Chartier (2009).

There are two different ways of understanding events (and under events I include here also texts as well as ideas), which we could call systematic and genealogical. Why is something the way it is? What is the meaning of something? One answer will look into the relation with other objects, concepts, practices, or uses that exist at the same time. A second approach is to look into how things came into being. Both methods of answering this basic question lead to different accounts, but these do not have to be in conflict with each other. Why is there a political left and right? What does “left” mean? A systematic answer will detail the general opposition between two political worldviews, each of which might have some kind of general coherence. A genealogical answer will go back to specific historical circumstances, among others, the historical event of two French political factions sitting at opposite sides of the isle, as part of a specific political system, and would trace the vicissitudes of these political views till today. This complex historical story has also a critical potential: given that political, social, and other circumstances have changed, one can wonder whether such a division in “left” and “right” still makes sense.

In order to acquire certain historiographical sensibilities, it is important to practice the research and writing of history. It is fruitful and enriching to practice different methodologies and not to focus exclusively on one kind (even if this is genealogy).⁵⁹ On an individual level, practicing a plurality of historiographical methodologies broadens one’s interests; one learns a diversity of skills, and one becomes more tolerant for other ways of doing history. On a disciplinary level, however, different kinds of practicing the history of philosophy still fit into a larger genealogical framework. As a discipline, ideally, the entire history of philosophy will be covered. Therefore, systematic studies of Descartes, sociological studies of Hume, or intellectual histories of the German Enlightenment can all contribute to an overarching genealogical project. Even the strangeness of the past, typically seen as the domain of “historians proper,” as well as the “broken-off branches” belong to genealogy, and the study of them is necessary for a correct understanding of the development of history in general and the history of philosophy in particular.

59. I have been arguing against views such as that of Martial Gueroult (1979, 49) who wrote that the “philosophical spirit” gives historical objects their *value as objects of history*, and it is therefore the philosophical side of the historian of philosophy that matters most. Historiography does not need a philosophical spirit to select its relevant objects, and this spirit is generally rather narrow minded.

*Understanding the Argument through
Then-Current Public Debates or
My Detective Method of History
of Philosophy*

Ursula Goldenbaum

*You did not know where to look, and so you missed all that
was important.*

SHERLOCK HOLMES¹

“HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY simply is philosophy, period! Philosophy of any time, if it is any good, can be understood by reading the text, checking the argument, and evaluating the suggested solutions by our professional standards.”² That is what I get to hear since I began working in my field of early modern philosophy. I am perfectly fine with the claim that history of philosophy is philosophy and thus under its rules. I agree that we have to look at the argument and check whether the solutions of the discussed problems hold water by professional standards. I cannot accept though the “period!” The somewhat naive recommendation “Look at their texts and see if they got it right!” takes as granted what should be shown first—that we were able to understand these texts without historical knowledge about their intellectual environment. But how can we know what their problems were? How do we even know the meaning of their words? Do the words *they used* and *we still use*

1. Doyle (1976), 66.

2. This is the summary of what I got to hear over decades, not a quote of anybody in particular, although Thomas Williams describes it pretty well as a position he almost shares: “The point is always to understand what’s at issue philosophically, not to understand how what’s at issue came to be at issue” (Williams 2008).

refer to the same things?³ How anachronistic the outcome of this assumption can become is evident from the long-lasting misunderstanding of “constitutionalism” as originating from the *Magna Carta* of England in 1225 creating a whole school in the Anglo-American literature.⁴ Unfortunately, the term “the people” in this medieval contract does not refer to all the citizens of a state. In 1225, it meant a handful of barons.⁵

I share the suspicion against historical explanations that remain a mere addition to the actual philosophical discussion, without explanatory power. I am tired as well of hagiographic appraisals of past philosophers’ achievements just because their outcome happens to fit our own results. Neither did Kant anticipate non-Euclidean geometries when talking about more than three dimensions in his first book⁶ nor did Althusius ask for popular sovereignty in any modern sense.⁷ Above all, I oppose *Ideengeschichte*,—as if ideas had a coherent history on their own. Ideas are found or created by human beings when they are needed, just as tools are invented or produced when needed.⁸ Also, once found and then forgotten in the storage of the history of ideas, they can be rediscovered after long periods if people are looking for them when grappling with new problems—as we remember a tool that might be helpful to solve a problem when it had rested unused somewhere in the garage for years. Such a rediscovery happened, e.g., in the thirteenth century to the ancient idea of political liberty when the rising power of cities and city-states made their leaders want to justify their independence from the Holy Roman Empire, after hundreds of years without references throughout

3. Richard Kraut suggested in a recent lecture titled *An Esthetic Reading of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* to translate the Greek word *kalon* no longer as “fine” or “noble” but as “beautiful”—because it often means that too and even just that. True, but will this solve the problem that the Greek word involved both, and even more meanings which we now distinguish? While we separate beauty from virtue, for the Greeks a man could not be beautiful without being good and noble.

4. For a critique of the anachronistic idea of the concept of “Constitutionalism,” see Goldenbaum (2011a), 501–2.

5. *Ibid.*, 505–6. See also Skinner (2002), 262.

6. Martin Schönfeld’s article for the *Stanford Encyclopedia* is certainly hard to top—he seriously believes Kant’s first book would show “the mark of genius” (Schönfeld 2012) in spite of the young Kant’s violation of the principle of inertia or the law of conservation.

7. See Gierke (1966), 160–61; Hueglin (1999), 182–83. Again, who are “the people”? Do we speak of the leaders of the guilds and magistrates or of all individuals of a state? Althusius’s concept of the people is still premodern, separating the people in about six ranks of social strata with different extension of rights and participation, the lowest being actors and executors.

8. With Hobbes I take *need* to be “the mother of all inventions” (Hobbes (1994), 16, chapter 4: “On Speech”).

medieval times.⁹ However, as soon as it was recycled it had also to be adapted to the new peculiar needs.

Thus, although we have a long tradition of philosophical texts, dealing with problems, and a big tool box of rules and concepts to solve them, acquired over the last 2,500 years, new philosophies originated because of new problems that had come up or because the old solutions were no longer sufficient. That is why there cannot be a *historia perennis* in any strict way. It was only with Galileo's *Assayer* that we understood the "properties of things", e.g. colors, as produced in our senses, i.e., as subjective.¹⁰ Only then the question for the possible access to the external world arose and thereby epistemology as a discipline. In the same way, there was no need for "the sublime" before the seventeenth century and it did not exist. It became an issue only in 1674 when Boileau pointed to the sublime language of the Old Testament thereby causing a wave of theologically inspired esthetics throughout Europe.¹¹ There was no free will before Augustine understood it as a way to unburden the Christian God from our sins by ascribing to us a special faculty to will freely.¹² Greek philosophy was fine without as was again Spinoza in the seventeenth century in light of modern science. And, it has finally been "discovered shockingly" that the *Magna Carta* "merely sprang up from the private ambition of a few selfish barons"¹³ and had nothing to do with *individual* human rights being an idea of modern time alone. Thus if we want to understand a past philosophy we have first to identify its problem and the possible and available options for its solution at the time. Only then we can discuss the suggested solution and judge its validity. To do this we need to grasp the *meaning* of a text before we can check its *truth*. Spinoza, in his rules of text interpretation, carefully distinguished these two different tasks to understand any past text. Thus—judging a text by our professional standards is absolutely fine with me—once the text's meaning, and the problem that is solved or pretended to be solved in that text, has been figured out. This latter task, I think, is the specific task of *history* of philosophy and it is for this task that I suggest the detective method.

9. For the republican recycling of Aristotle in earliest modern Italian city republics, see Skinner (1990), 121–22.

10. See Galilei (1957), 273–78.

11. See Boileau (1682), 16–17. For the theological implications of the origin of esthetics as a "new science," see Goldenbaum (2011b), 305–15.

12. See Augustine (1993), in particular 29–31, 57, 64–83.

13. Skinner (2002), 262.

The programmatic article of a new analytical journal on history of philosophy may serve as a perfect example for the spectacular failure of a mere “logical analysis” of a philosophical text of the past, due to its author’s ignoring of the historical intellectual context.¹⁴ The author chose the example of Kant’s famous *Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment* as his subject to show the power of his method of mere “logical analysis.” As a result, he criticized Kant for confusing the terms “immaturity” (*Unmündigkeit*) and “tutelage” (*Vormundschaft*).¹⁵ Because the people in Prussia were ruled by an absolute monarch and lacked freedom of speech they “obviously” could not be blamed for bearing with their not “self-incurred” but “imposed tutelage.” Kant, thus the author, simply chose the false categories. Not that I am bothered by the author’s criticism of the great Kant; neither do I disagree with his statement about Prussia’s political system. I simply wonder how a philosopher who pretends to understand Kant’s text better by mere “logical analysis” can so completely miss the point of the famous opening sentence of that essay! As if Kant could have ignored the fact of political absolutism in Prussia! His declared subject in the essay is just about the possibility of enlightenment under the condition of absolute monarchy. Moreover, Kant’s meticulous wording is notorious and he definitely *meant* to say that the people “incurred” their “immaturity” themselves. The famous first sentence of the *Essay*, so often quoted, offers in a nutshell the absolutely central idea of Kant’s practical philosophy that everybody has the duty to choose the right maxim herself to become a moral being (or not), *no matter what circumstances* she is in. We have after all free will.¹⁶ If one wants to criticize the opening sentence of Kant’s *Essay on Enlightenment* by this suggested “logical analysis”—and still wants to be logically coherent—one has to abandon Kant’s practical philosophy altogether. But I seriously doubt this to be the author’s intention.

Thus history of philosophy is obviously needed, if only to clarify terminology. The meaning of the used terms can only be understood in the way they were used at the time.¹⁷ But we further need to understand the *intention* of the past philosopher in order to get what he meant to say. I am aware that I am stirring up a hornet’s nest—intentions are considered psychological, something beyond philosophy and argument. But I don’t talk about psychological states of past authors. Neither will I go into the deep water of hermeneutics.

14. Newen (1998), 23–29.

15. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

16. While this view prevails all of Kant’s moral writing, see for a focused formulation in Kant (1996a), 65.

17. Admirers of Wittgenstein should know this. See *Philosophical Investigations*, § 43.

I simply ask for the intention of an author in the sense a detective asks for the motives of a wrongdoer. A detective's search for a motive for a crime leads her investigation as much as a scientist is led by his hypothesis. She will not close her case before she finds a convincing motive of the wrongdoer, just as a scientist will not stop before the phenomena fit a coherent hypothesis.¹⁸ As soon as it is found, all pieces fall into their places, in both cases. For me, when I turn to a new philosophical text from the past, I feel and proceed like a detective, collecting data and looking for a hypothesis to make sense of them.

Of course, I begin by carefully reading the texts of the author under investigation, together with texts of related authors. But I do not trust their statements about their intentions. I suspend my judgment and compare the texts in what they suggest or argue against. Like a detective, I have to make sure that I understand their statements correctly, i.e., in the sense they were meant at that time, which does not only cause special problems in case of foreign languages but also when technical terms occur in these texts as it is pretty common in philosophy. Thus I need to learn about the use of these terms at the time. I try to figure out whether or in what sense the authors of the texts under my investigation were sincere in their mutual arguments: what they said in public and what in their letters, what was their explicit statement and what was said implicitly.¹⁹ Also, I try to look for alternative options they could have chosen to solve their problem (in a mere philosophical way). Last but not least, as a detective I also look to "the facts" or the surrounding reality of my authors, the rules of discourse at the time, opportunities for publication, censorship, prevailing theological demands, political conditions, etc. in order to discover their options.

Thus, as a detective would look for "good reasons" some of the suspects might have had for committing the crime, I look for the "good reasons" a philosopher might have had to take a particular stance in a controversy. While a detective may search for last wills, bank accounts, love stories, and jealousy, I will ask for possible philosophical intentions to solve a particular problem in such a way that it can secure a certain intended outcome and will exclude those competing positions that could hinder that intended outcome—through argument. All human actions are driven by intentions. Aren't philosophical texts actions as well?

18. Einstein/Infeld (1971), 4–5 and 75–76.

19. To be sure, I am not favoring the often crazily arbitrary reading "between the lines" of Strauss (1989), 25. His naive suggestions for reading a text lack any consistent criteria to distinguish between what he calls esoteric and exoteric meaning as is clear from his practical results in using his method. He simply ascribes these attributes according to his own likings or dislikings, in case of the less-liked Mendelssohn even violating his duties as an editor.

A detective takes the statements of witnesses and involved agents and then checks them against each other by further interrogation. But I can't ask past philosophers anymore. However, we still have the philosophical controversies of their time. Since the late seventeenth century we even have public debates, which can provide the material and statements that allow me to search for the "good reasons" of past philosophers.²⁰ The way in which philosophers argue with their opponents during such philosophical controversies is far more illuminating in respect to their intentions as well as their logical strengths than any preface of their works could ever be. Moreover, nobody can see the weakness of a philosophical argument as clearly as a contemporary opponent who will also provide hints to see what is at stake in their mutual exchange of arguments. I see philosophical controversies and, even more, public debates as accelerated and dense periods of the discourse in a society, when philosophers, scientists, and theologians of a country discussed, simultaneously and intensively, one and the same particular subject, often referring directly to each other. Thus, the investigation of such public debates appears to me a perfect tool for the investigation of past philosophies, to understand why a problem was a problem for these philosophers and what kind of philosophical ammunition was needed to get them solved or to fight opposed positions.²¹

In addition, the rich material of public debates since early modern times provides us with different layers of the contemporary audience, from other philosophers or philosophical experts to theologians, politicians, newspaper-journalists, and court administrators in regard to censorship cases. The public debates, going on not only in books and philosophical journals, dissertation defenses and university programs, but in newspapers and flyers, sermons, and caricatures, enable us to trace the effect of philosophical statements on the audience for even periods as small as months. Thus we can see to what extent a book, an article, a public statement, or a measure of censorship

20. It was my interest in the *reasons* that would bring about new ideas, especially new philosophical ideas, that led me to my research project on public debates in eighteenth-century Germany. Together with my colleagues, we reconstructed seven such debates (see Goldenbaum 2004).

21. While Eric Watkins is perfectly right to state that quite a few Wolffians changed their position from preestablished harmony toward *influxus physicus*, his assumption that this was simply due to the convincing power of the latter position is bluntly wrong. In fact, it was the result of the extreme theologico-political pressure to not to teach preestablished harmony at all (if one wanted to keep or get an academic position). The example of Gottsched is striking. See Watkins (1995), 295–339, especially his introduction, 295–300; Watkins (1998), 136–203; for a critique, see Goldenbaum (2012b, forthcoming).

became the buzz of the city. But it is not only interesting with regard to the reception of a philosophy but also for the origin of new philosophical ideas, because philosophers were provoked and inspired by public debates or controversies to find and promote new arguments in order to counter their opponents and hinder their success. Investigating public debates is hard work and extremely time-consuming. However, as a result of the research into public debates and controversies, we can not only reconstruct the general intellectual conditions of philosophical work for one philosopher of that period but for all of them. Admittedly, the rich material of these public debates is a particular advantage of early modern philosophy and is lacked by ancient or medieval philosophy. Nevertheless, I would still consider investigating controversies in a broader context as an appropriate detective tool as often as we can find these controversies.

Thus what I see as the specific task of the *historian* of philosophy and what I am trying to do in my own work is to reconstruct the problems and the intention of a past philosopher as well as to explain his terminology. In this way, the *historian* has to explore the meaning that the text had for the author and his audience. Only then I can read the text as I read a contemporary philosophical text whose problem I can understand much more easily due to my familiarity with the current intellectual discourse and the ongoing controversies as well as the facts the text touches on. Only then the *philosopher* in the historian of philosophy can check the validity of the argument and its truth. In the following section, I will use Kant's *Essay on Enlightenment* to illustrate my suggested detective method for the *historical* task of a historian of philosophy in a short case study—i.e., I will try to find the *meaning* of Kant's *Essay* so that I can then judge the validity of his argument by the standards of philosophy.

2. *The Meaning of Kant's Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*

I chose this text because it is short, it is well known to a broader audience, and the contrast between my approach to it and the one criticized above may more easily illustrate my point. Thus what is Kant's *Essay* about? In addition to the often quoted opening sentence, providing Kant's famous definition of enlightenment, the essay suggests a way in which the enlightenment of a people is possible in whatever political circumstances. Such enlightenment can occur if and only if a free public discourse is allowed, among learned men on the one hand and between these learned men and the authorities of the church and state on

the other.²² This view of the text is generally accepted. I will begin my investigation by taking a closer look at the often noticed peculiar formulation of the first sentence, taking into account that Kant carefully chose his wording. Then I will discuss his suggested model for enlightenment—the public discourse—and situate it within the spectrum of then-current alternative models.

The term “self-incurred immaturity” (*selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit*) has drawn quite some attention in Kant scholarship. Of course, its meaning has been discussed especially when it had to be translated. In English, “minority” or “immaturity” are used for “*Unmündigkeit*.”²³ Some authors suggested “tutelage,” which does not seem right because it is imposed and cannot be self-incurred.²⁴ However, even “immaturity” or “minority” can hardly be regarded as self-incurred when they refer to age or mental health as the legal origin of these terms would suggest. Because of the origin of the term “*Unmündigkeit*” (and its English correspondents) in legal language there has been a long-lasting general agreement that Kant borrowed this term from jurisprudence. But while this understanding fits “immaturity” it does not go well with “self-incurred,” or even worse, with the original German “*selbstverschuldet*,” literally meaning being guilty of having caused something. While the refusal to get out of immaturity might be considered culpable, legal immaturity can hardly be thought of as self-caused.

However, the legal origin of Kant’s term “immaturity” has been questioned in recent decades, though without great impact yet. First, the German theologian Frieder Löttsch pointed to the use of the term by the enlightened theologian Johann Joachim Spalding in his Berlin *Inaugural Sermon* of 1764.²⁵ We know that Kant held Spalding’s sermons in high regard²⁶ and that he sent

22. Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (in German 1962) caused an entire historical literature about the public discourse in German Enlightenment, driven by literary critics, about journals, literary societies, salons, etc. (without ever looking at enlightened theology or at the long tradition of public debates in German Enlightenment since the seventeenth century) that is still lasting in the United States where the book has been translated in 1989. While its blunt historical shortcomings are usually excused by its systematic goals, these mistakes still shape historical research as well as systematic discussions of the public sphere.

23. Beck translated the term as “tutelage” (Beck (1995), 83), Mary Gregor as “minority” (Kant (1996b), 17), James Schmidt and others as “immaturity” (Schmidt (1996), 58).

24. In German, “Vormundschaft” is imposed by law in case of “Unmündigkeit” while “Unmündigkeit” is a matter of fact.

25. Löttsch (1973), 320.

26. “Beobachtungen aus dem gemeinen Leben, wozu in Spaldings Predigten gute Anleitung gegeben wird,” in Kant (1910-ongoing), *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Academy of Prussia, vol. 24, 808 (this edition henceforth abbreviated KAA, followed by the volume number). This is also confirmed by Kant’s biographer Borowski.

Spalding his *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* in 1766.²⁷ Spalding used the term “immaturity” when speaking of the process of our own education from immature to true Christians by following Jesus Christ and embracing the moral law.²⁸ Norbert Hinske, the well-known German Kant scholar, noticed that Kant had never used the term in any publication before the *Essay*.²⁹ Thus he dug deeper, following the hint of Löttsch, and traced back the theological use of “immaturity” to the then common German Lutheran translation of the Bible (since 1704), and more specifically, to *Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*.³⁰ Paul, in this translation, speaks of the “Unmündigkeit” of those who have not yet embraced Christian faith.³¹ Thus Spalding’s use of the term “Unmündigkeit” was in precise agreement with Paul’s *Letter*. However, the original Lutheran translation of the Greek word was “Knechtschaft” and the respective English word “bondage” is still used in current English Bibles. Thus the use of the term “Unmündigkeit” in the revised German Lutheran Bible, and as a result, in German Lutheran theological literature of the eighteenth century, could hardly be discovered by a foreign or Catholic Kant scholar nor could it be seen by “logical analysis.”

Once the theological origin of the term “immaturity” is clear, its striking combination with the adjective “self-incurred” becomes natural. This adjective obviously points to the fall of man—original sin. And if we look at Kant’s *Religion in the Limits of Reason Alone* (nine years ahead) his statement there confirms such a reading. There he claims that the “promulgation of [the Christian doctrine of faith] can well be called the revelation of something which had hitherto remained a mystery for human beings through *their own guilt*.”³² Thus, the message of Christian faith ought to have been known by human individuals before its promulgation through Jesus Christ, but it was not—due to their original sin. Taking this together with the first sentence of the *Essay*, it says quite clearly and simply that we need to overcome our

27. Kant sent it via Mendelssohn to Spalding and Sack on February 7, 1766, in: KAA 10, 67–68.

28. See Spalding (1764), 19.

29. Hinske (1977), 545.

30. *Ibid.*, 547.

31. What is striking when looking at this passage of Paul’s *Letter* are the several occurrences not only of the term “*Unmündigkeit*” but also of the other term used by Kant in his essay, namely, “*Vormund*,” respectively, “*Vormünder*.”

32. Kant (2009), 142–43 (emphasis mine). The words in italics deviate slightly from the translation of Alan Wood and George di Giovanni who have “fault,” which seems to address the sinner’s guilt less pointed than the German “*eigene Schuld*.”

failure to use the freedom we were given by Jesus Christ, to think on our own and embrace the moral law given by Jesus Christ. This would then be what Kant means by enlightenment and it is very much in agreement not only with Spalding's view of enlightenment but also with Kant's mature moral philosophy.

Paul's *Letter to the Galatians* is an extremely polemical text. Written to attack the then recent influence of Judaeo-Christian apostles under whose influence Galatians aimed to hold onto the Jewish law while becoming Christians (Judaeo-Christians), Paul is eager to draw a sharp line between Jews and Christians, and he does not shy away from abusing Jewish religion and law as incompatible with Christian faith. He calls the Jews "immature"—in obeying their law they were immature children and indistinguishable from servants; in contrast, Christians were led into freedom by Jesus Christ. The law is considered to have served as the "pedagogue," keeping us in line until the appearance of Jesus Christ, but no longer needed once the savior had come and set us free. The most aggressive passage, twisting even the textual evidence of the *Old Testament*, is Paul's juxtaposition of Abraham's two sons, one the legal son of his free wife (Sarah), being related to Jerusalem in heaven (meaning the Christian community), the other the son of the maid Hagar, being sent to the desert, related to the earthly Jerusalem on the hill (meaning the city of the Jews). Nothing could be more anachronistic if Paul were judged according to rules of textual interpretation. Today, especially in German Protestant systematic theology, this *Letter* is heavily under suspicion of being anti-Judaic³³ but current theological literature mostly focuses on the time of Paul and early Christianity and not on the *Letter's* use in eighteenth-century Lutheran theology.³⁴

To see how much Kant, picking "immaturity" from Paul's *Letter to the Galatians*, was simply in agreement with the mainstream of Lutheran theological enlightenment or perhaps in a greater distance to it, I checked the writings of his contemporaries. I found clear evidence for the use of Paul's *Letter* in the writings of Johann Georg Hamann, a rather close acquaintance of Kant. He discussed it not only in his London writings documenting his awakening as a "new Christian"³⁵ but also in the pamphlet (*Golgatha and Scheblimini*) that he wrote against Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, published in the same

33. See Bachmann (1999), 127–58.

34. See the recent comprehensive study of Anders Gerdmar (2009). Unfortunately, Gerdmar does not explain the anti-Semitic positions from a theological standpoint but simply presents them as anti-Semitic.

35. See Hamann (1993), 415.

year as Kant's essay.³⁶ Hamann talks of the Jews as being immature and unable to act according to the moral law and thus needing to obey their external law as servants. In contrast, Christians had been set free by Jesus Christ in order to begin the process of education to leave such an immaturity. As a result, Hamann denies the Jews civil rights.

Although much less aggressive in style than Hamann, the leading enlightened theologians in Prussia and in Hannover, also called neologians, saw the process of enlightenment as identical with the education of true Christians, from immaturity to true morality—Spalding's *Inaugural Sermon* being exemplary in this respect. The enlightened Lutheran theologian Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Jerusalem shared this position, as did the Reformed theologian Sack at Berlin. But the one theologian who most obviously dwelled on "immaturity" and its overcoming through Jesus Christ, who indeed unfolded the educational potential of that notion into an entire *philosophy of history*, was Johann Salomo Semler, praised as *the* theologian of enlightenment.³⁷ When Spalding and Sack met with Jerusalem in 1770 to discuss the educational improvement of the Prussian College Kloster Bergen—and indeed education in general³⁸—they invited the famous Semler to their meeting. This meeting of the four most influential German enlightened Protestant theologians even raised conspiracy rumors in the newspapers and caused resistance among conservatives.³⁹

Semler started his theological project in the early 1770s due to the crisis of Protestant theology resulting from the continuous historical research about the origins of Christianity. He contrasted Christian religion, which he saw as universal and moral, with Jewish religion, seen as particular and political with hardly any morals. Being bound by the Jewish statutory law, Jewish religion could not develop any further and thus remained essentially static. In contrast, Christian religion was dynamic, constantly pushed forward by a discourse between "more able Christians," in particular the "more learned theologians," and the official church authorities. Christian religion had changed from its early beginning until the present time and it would further change in infinity, becoming less and less dogmatic and more and more pure in terms of morals. Interestingly, with respect to Kant, Semler saw the driving engine of this dynamic process of Christianity's development, from

36. Hamann (1825), 47–48, 50–51, 65.

37. See Hornig (1996).

38. They met at the behest of the Prussian enlightened state secretary for education, Karl Abraham von Zedlitz, a figure well known to Kant scholars.

39. See Hornig (1996), 41–44.

the early Judaco-Christians via Catholic strengthening of church authorities toward Protestant freedom of faith and further to pure morality, in the *public discourse* and the struggle of learned theologians with church authorities. He called the former “private theology” (*Privattheologie*) and the latter “public theology” (*öffentliche Theologie*)⁴⁰—which should ring a bell with Kant scholars, pointing us to the second important issue in Kant’s *Essay*.⁴¹

According to Semler’s eschatological understanding of Christianity, no particular Christian dogma could be taken as its essential religious truth. Its true and pure message lay rather hidden in all parts of its doctrine and emerged with increasing clarity throughout history. Only at the end of the world, pure morality would appear as its actual message. By turning the contingent history of Christianity with its dogmatic inconsistencies between various periods and various denominations into a theology of history, Semler made a virtue out of necessity. The continuous progress in historical and hermeneutical work by Lutheran and other Christian theologians since the seventeenth century had made it increasingly clear that, shockingly, Jesus Christ was not a Christian but a Jew; although he held beliefs, he kept the Jewish law. Simultaneously, the traditionally clear separation of Jews and Christians became unclear given the close relation of the Jew Jesus and his Jewish disciples, Christian Jews, and gentile Christians. What has traditionally been considered Christian religion had actually been taught only later—by Paul.

Semler’s view reducing Christian religion to pure morality looks progressive—like a project of enlightenment. It stays away from dogmatic controversies and tries to see all disagreements as steps on the way to the true moral teachings of Christianity. However, while this new philosophy of history gives credit to all historical states of Christianity, it denies such historical consideration to all other religions. Moreover, by identifying morality with the inmost teaching of Christianity, Semler denies morality to all other religions and especially to Jews (being the only significant group of non-Christians in Prussia). According to Semler, to become a moral being one would necessarily have to become a Christian. Because the historical process would lead to more and more morality, it would create finally one universal religion of humankind, making all human beings Christians. Accordingly, the subject of Semler’s philosophy of history was humankind, not only Christians, who would move to Christianity. As a result, Semler’s theology or Christian philosophy of history is extremely intolerant,

40. See Semler (1777), 181–82.

41. Hornig states that he did not find any other distinction between “public” and “private religion” before Semler’s introduction of these terms in the mid-1770s (Hornig (1996), 186, footnote 15). He uses the latter term when promoting the freedom of a public discourse on private religion, i.e., individual views in contrast to official church opinions.

which made him the particular target of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's critique. Lessing wrote his *Education of Humankind*—often misunderstood as another version of Semler's philosophy of history—precisely to dispute Semler's project. Lessing attacked “enlightened” theologians for being even more intolerant than Lutheran orthodoxy.⁴² Of course, the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn noticed Semler's anti-Judaic move as well and recognized such a “historical turn” also in other Christian theologians. That was the reason for his objections against the philosophy of history in *Jerusalem* in 1783.⁴³

In contrast to Lessing and Mendelssohn, Kant in his *Essay on Enlightenment*, seems to be quite comfortable with Semler's philosophy of history. He makes it the courageous decision of the *single individual* to overcome his “self-incurred immaturity”—as do Semler and Spalding.⁴⁴ In addition, looking at Semler's driving engine of the suggested dynamic development of Christianity to morality, Kant did not have to change much to arrive at his own model of enlightenment of a people through *public discourse* of the *learned*. In fact, he had only to switch “public” into “private.” As is well known, he explains how such a public discourse and struggle, given freedom, could allow for a slow but continuous process of enlightenment of a people and even of the authorities. Kant's surprising switch of “public” and “private,” noticed by his contemporaries,⁴⁵ is simply due to the increasingly ambiguous use of the term “public” (*öffentlich*) in German during the second half of the eighteenth century. While it unequivocally referred to an office or authority in the past (from the Latin word “*officium*”), it had been increasingly used for the actual public discourse since the middle of the century—due to its frequent use in the journals. Of course, Kant also extended Semler's model of public discourse to other areas than theology, such as law and medicine. Notwithstanding, his own emphasis is clearly on religion and he explicitly calls religion “the main point of enlightenment.”⁴⁶

42. Lessing began the publication of the fragments of Reimarus's *Apology* in the third “*Beytrag*” of his series *Zur Geschichte und Litteratur. Aus den Schätzen der Herzoglichen Bibliothek zu Wolfenbüttel*, with the first fragment, and continued with five more fragments in the fourth “*Beytrag*” in 1777. See Lessing (1968), 12, 254–90, and 303–450. About the *Fragmentenstreit*, see Kröger (1979).

43. Mendelssohn (1971-ongoing), *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 8, 162–64 (this edition henceforth abbreviated JubA, followed by the volume number). Mendelssohn clearly had in mind philosophies of history like that of Semler (1771–1775), and (1777) or of Herder (1774). The title of Herder's work should be carefully read in relation to Semler and other theological authors producing philosophy of history as education of humankind.

44. These are the learned theologians Kant refers to in his *Essay* (see Kant (1996b), 17–18).

45. See Hinske (1977), 1st Einleitung, S. LVII.

46. Kant (1996b), 21.

Given the close agreement of Kant with Semler in their use of “immaturity” as well as in their model of enlightenment, the question arises of how the philosopher Kant could have been “influenced” by the earlier theological program of Semler? I am rather suspicious about “influences” and doubt that one can ever get influenced by simply reading a book if one is not already looking for a suggestion that it could provide. Although in this case the congruence is striking—almost literal—Kant is not particularly known for studying theological books. However, in the case of Semler’s project it would have been rather hard for Kant as for any other intellectual in Prussia to ignore Semler’s ideas—because of the many public debates that had flooded Prussia and the Protestant area of the Empire since the 1770s—with Semler heavily involved. I will not mention the discussion of his writings by his theological colleagues, although they often published their critiques in non-professional journals as well. But I have to point to the *Fragmentenstreit*,⁴⁷ initiated by Lessing when he published the *Reimarus Fragments*. These *Fragments* raised questions about the connection between the Old and the New Testament and about Jesus as the source for Christian moral religion. (The publication included Lessing’s objections to the *Fragments* (1778)). Semler reacted vehemently.⁴⁸ Lessing’s *Education of Humankind* was published in 1780,⁴⁹ though it was already circulating. In this work Lessing directly challenged Semler and his theology of history as the education of humankind. By suggesting the possibility of overcoming Christianity by an eternal “Gospel of Reason,” Lessing raised doubts about the “infinite dynamic development” of Christianity and asked whether other than Christians could not as well embrace the “Gospel of Reason.” In addition, he suggested that people other than learned men could contribute their thoughts about Christianity as well, thus also pushing authorities forward. Above all, Lessing criticized Semler for the striking intolerance of his *theology of history*, with its denial of morals to other religions.⁵⁰ Other important public debates taking place at that time concerned (1) the vow of clerics on the Symbolic Books of the churches—a vow that caused conflicts

47. See Kröger (1979).

48. Semler even included a satire in his reply to Lessing, although he denied being its author. For Lessing’s reaction to Semler, see Lessing (1968) 16, 492.

49. See Lessing (2005), 217–40. See Kröger (1979) and Goldenbaum (2012c, forthcoming).

50. See Lessing to his brother Karl on April 8, 1773, in Lessing (1968) 18, 83: “*Was gehen mich die Orthodoxen an? Ich verachte sie eben so sehr, als Du; nur verachte ich unsere neumodischen Geistlichen noch mehr, die Theologen viel zu wenig, und Philosophen lange nicht genug sind. Ich bin von solchen schalen Köpfen auch sehr überzeugt, daß, wenn man sie aufkommen läßt, sie mit der Zeit mehr tyrannisieren werden, als es die Orthodoxen jemals getan haben.*” See also his better known letter to his brother on February 2, 1774 (in *ibid.* 101).

of conscience for many pastors—and (2) the Prussian Law. Kant refers to both public debates in his *Essay*.⁵¹

But above all—there was the other public debate on Jewish emancipation, going on in the very year of Kant's *Essay*. While most public debates concerned exclusively Christians, this one touched on the interests of both Jews and Christians. It began in 1781 with Christian Wilhelm Dohm's *On Civil Improvement of the Jews*.⁵² This book came out just before the first *Tolerance Edicts* of Joseph II in Austria in 1782.⁵³ One year later, Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* appeared, providing a profound legal justification for the separation of state and church, thus allowing for a secular state, and presenting the Jews as capable of morals, and thus ready to become citizens.⁵⁴ Semler had been part of this debate too, if only because of the challenge presented by Mendelssohn's talk of morals in the Jewish law. In his book, Mendelssohn had implicitly criticized Semler and other Protestant theologians for their defense of the vow on the Symbolic Books by pastors when taking office because this vow perpetuated the traditional connection of state and church and was an obstacle to Jewish civil rights. In contrast, Mendelssohn defined churches (meaning all religious communities) as simply spiritual and voluntary communities, without any authoritarian power, allowing their members to develop their insights and their faith without restrictions by church authorities. In a way, Mendelssohn asked his Christian contemporaries to give up the statutory vows of clerics made on the *Symbolic Books* and to become free in their thinking and belief.⁵⁵ He was attacked immediately in a quite demagogic way by the Pietist theologian Johann David Michaelis. Mendelssohn had used the example of the English high clerics and members of the House of Lords (avoiding mention of the theologians next door) to raise his question about whether they all could still possibly believe precisely what they had made their vow on in their youth. Michaelis attacked the Jewish philosopher for allegedly accusing the English high clerics of being hypocrites.⁵⁶ This alone caused a controversy again. But of course, all influential enlightened theologians defended the vows as a legitimate practice of Christian churches.

51. Kant (1996b), 19 and 21.

52. Dohm (1781); for the public debate initiated by this book, see Heinrich (2004).

53. About the readiness of the Prussian administration for such reforms in Prussia, see Heinrich (2004), 827–32.

54. JubA 8, 109–31, 164–70, and especially 169.

55. JubA 8, 131–42.

56. See Löwenbrück (1994), 324–32.

All these public debates were very well known to Kant when he was writing his *Essay*. He closely followed the journals and newspapers and knew the positions of Semler, Spalding, Herder, Lessing, and Mendelssohn, all of whom published intensively in these years. Hamann also trumpeted the news to him. Kant's *Essay* is written in full awareness of all these positions and thus his own stake has to be situated in this field of alternatives. While I take it to be evident that Kant uses the term "immaturity" in the sense of Semler, Spalding, Herder, and Hamann—i.e., picking up on Paul's *Letter*—I think there is sufficient evidence as well that Kant found his model for enlightenment in Semler's theology of history. Obviously, he extended Semler's model beyond theology but he did not allow other than learned individuals to participate in the public discourse to pursue enlightenment (as had been suggested by Lessing and others). Also, Kant (as much as Semler, Spalding, and Herder) sees the development of pure morality as a progress *within* the history of Christianity, thus excluding Jews qua Jews from this process of enlightenment.⁵⁷ These findings about Kant's *Essay* are in precise agreement with what he explicitly states in his *Religion in the Limits of Reason alone*, published in 1793.

That this is the meaning of Kant's *Essay* is further confirmed by the specific statement in this text that the state is not supposed to do *anything* other than allow the public discourse. Rather, the state would endanger the process of enlightenment if it intervened in the slow course of enlightenment through public discourse. Finally, Kant explicitly praises the "enlightened" king Frederick for his *contempt of tolerance* which—at the peak of the hot discussion of Joseph's ongoing *Tolerance Edicts* for Jews in Austria—could not be misunderstood by his contemporaries. It was known that Friedrich stubbornly resisted the demands of his own administration (including Dohm) that he should follow Joseph's example. Kant, without using any invectives (as his friend Hamann preferred), unequivocally rejects Mendelssohn's and Dohm's political demand that the Prussian state give civil rights to Jews, e.g., allow them to buy their houses and stay without the constant threat of being expelled by state authorities. Thus Kant's *Essay* has to be read as his answer, not to Mendelssohn's essay on enlightenment, but to Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* from the year before. Kant considers Jews qua Jews as "immature" due to their lack of courage to make a decision by means of their free will and to embrace

57. For the close relation of Spalding to Lavater, see the instructive introduction of Simon Ravidowicz to JubA 7, involving the material of the Lavater affair, xi-cv. That also Herder expected a positive philosophical proof of Mendelssohn in favor of his Jewishness is clear from his letter to Hartknoch; see *ibid.*, lxxvii.

the moral law, taught exclusively by Jesus Christ, instead of their statutory Jewish law—the law that makes them servants, unable to become moral beings. From there he can “conclude correctly” they could not be accepted as equal citizens. That this was indeed Kant’s view can be seen in his *Religion in the Limits of Reason Alone* where it is fully fleshed out.⁵⁸

Finally, Kant also answers the question of religious vows on the *Symbolic Books*, agreeing again with the above-mentioned Lutheran theologians that the church has the right to ask its employed pastors to take the vow to teach their communities only what is in agreement with the *Symbolic Books* (as private officeholders, in Kant’s wording). If they do not hold these opinions any more, they still have to teach them or, if their conscience does not allow this any more, they have to lay down their office. Kant justifies this policy by arguing that doctors, judges, and military officers also had to obey the authority as private men, while having the liberty to publish as learned men. He neglects to mention, though, that their obedience was mostly about action while pastors had to teach beliefs to their communities. For many Prussian pastors, the vow was felt as a burden and a hindrance to freedom of conscience. That is why Mendelssohn had addressed the vows as conflicting with the freedom of thought.

After this investigation of Kant’s *Essay*, I wonder how I had never seen these specific statements, which I see now as clear as day as his specific answers to the then open specific questions under public debate. The reason for my blindness is obviously the same that Sherlock Holmes provided for the embarrassed police inspector who had overlooked an important trace in the mud. He comforted the police inspector: “It was invisible, buried in the mud. I only saw it because I was looking for it.”⁵⁹ Do my findings mean that Kant did not ask for independent thinking in his *Essay*? Not at all; of course he did. Kant as much as Semler was an enlightener, and their writings presented huge challenges to their church authorities. Nevertheless, both men delivered another intolerant message as well, which got lost too easily in the course of the centuries since, or worse, which had never been noticed by Christian readers because they shared that part of the message with these authors.

At this point, my specific work as a *historian* of philosophy is done and it is now up to the *philosopher* in the historian of *philosophy* to judge the validity of Kant’s argument and conclusion and to ask how these statements are grounded in his philosophical system—or how they shaped it. As a philosopher, I can see the validity of his argument once one accepts the following of

58. See Kant (2009), 71, 129–32, 113–16, 142–43.

59. Doyle (1976), 319.

his presuppositions: First, that the Jewish law is a statutory law that does not include moral teachings and thus does not allow a Jew qua Jew to be a moral being; second, that Christianity alone includes the moral law, third, that we have free will and can decide to become moral beings if we are courageous, fourth, that only learned men can make meaningful contributions to promote enlightenment, fifth, that the state must not intervene in any way in enlightenment. If I accept these assumptions, I can see Kant's point. However, I do not share any of these assumptions and do not see Kant giving evidence for any of them. He could simply rely on the agreement of most of his Christian contemporaries, with the exception of Lessing.

Seeing now the unjustified assumptions in Kant's *Essay*, I become curious to investigate Kant's obvious shift to the philosophy of history in 1784—a shift that might be informed by the very same theological project he follows in the *Essay*. I want to check whether his peculiar and extremely strict separation of morals from law might be informed by his strict division between Christian morals and Jewish law. To be sure, Kant expresses his opinion that Christian religion alone teaches the moral law not only in the *Essay* and the *Religion within the Boundaries of Reason Alone* but also in his *Critique of Practical Reason*—as I see now. His separation of morals and law is very close to that of Pufendorf and in open opposition to the view Mendelssohn takes in *Jerusalem*, as he follows Leibniz and Wolff in their *continuous* view of legal law and morals. These opposed positions should not easily be decided in Kant's favor; they are still under discussion today, as positivism versus natural right theories.

I would like to raise one more question in the end of my case study, although I have no space to pursue it. How can we criticize a past philosopher for violating those insights we now believe in but that we arrived at on the basis of argument? Can I criticize Kant for excluding Jews from morals or should I excuse him due to historical circumstances? While I don't see a way to find an absolute measure for such criticism I would consider critical alternatives and arguments available to Kant in his day that raised questions about his positions. In the case of Kant, this could be his younger fellow Christian Lessing who had published the plays *The Jews* in 1754 and *Nathan the Wise* in 1779 precisely to dispute the general prejudice of the "immaturity" of the Jews.⁶⁰ Kant did not like these plays.⁶¹ Kant had also studied carefully

60. Lessing published his blunt reply to the critical review of his play *Die Juden* by Michaelis in his journal *Theatralische Bibliothek* in 1754 (see Lessing (1968) 6, 159–66).

61. According to Hamann, Kant considered *Nathan the Wise* as simply the other part of Lessing's *The Jews* and would not like any hero from this [Jewish] people anyway. See Hamann to Herder on May 6, 1779, in Hamann (1959), 77.

Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* when he wrote his *Essay* but did not learn anything about the morals of the Jewish law from it. To me, this seems to be an ignorant attitude for a philosopher and shows him rather to be a "stubborn" Christian. And in case somebody would point me to Kant's well-known positive letter to Mendelssohn about *Jerusalem*,⁶² look at it again. It finishes with the idea of the development of all religions toward *one universal religion*,⁶³ thus denying the main thesis of Mendelssohn's book as well as that of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*—the view that God's house has *many mansions*.

3. Method

I can hear the protest that I have not used any "theory" for my method of history of philosophy⁶⁴ and I admit my reluctance to engage in "theory." I have simply learned how my growing historical (and philosophical) knowledge has helped me to "see" what is said in a philosophical argument—besides that which is obvious. I do not favor arbitrary readings between the lines. Rather, I have made historical discoveries while following the philosophical argument and found arguments while paying attention to the history. When I discovered Leibniz's marginalia in Spinoza's *Theologico-political Treatise* in 1994 it was not by luck. Rather, like a detective, I had "seen" Spinoza everywhere in the printed text of Leibniz's *Commentatiuncula de iudice controversiarum*, although the name was not mentioned. I figured out the library Leibniz would have used in 1670 and went there in order to find the copy of the *Theologico-political Treatise* to show that Leibniz could have read it. I found indeed the copy Leibniz read—and I found Leibniz's marginalia as an extra proof.⁶⁵ In contrast, a careful study of Leibniz's marginalia in various Hobbes volumes in the same library allowed me to see precisely when and moreover why Leibniz actually picked up Hobbes's concept of the conatus, namely, for his philosophy of mind.⁶⁶ Up to then, we only knew *that* he adopted and adapted this Hobbesian concept. I felt again like a detective when I studied the history of

62. Kant to Mendelssohn on August 16, 1783, in KAA 10, 344–47.

63. *Ibid.*, 347.

64. One review of my book (Goldenbaum, 2004) was titled "Fröhlicher Positivismus," thus presenting me and my colleagues as piling up facts and lacking (Foucault's ?) "theory." I am perfectly fine with this kind of criticism as long as even this reviewer admitted that in light of our great many new findings the understanding of German intellectual history changed. See Till (2006).

65. See Goldenbaum (2008a). For an earlier explanatory discussion of this finding, see Goldenbaum (1999).

66. See Goldenbaum (2008b).

the public debate on the Wolffian *Wertheim Bible* 1735–39 and was surprised to find quotes of Longinus’s text on the sublime used against this translation of the Bible. Seeing that the theologian Alexander Baumgarten published his declaration for the new science of esthetics at the very moment of the general attack of Pietists against the *Wertheim Bible* in September 1735, I followed my suspicion, my hypothesis, and tried hard to get all the pieces together to give evidence for it.⁶⁷ I did not find them in the history of esthetics but I suddenly knew where to look. I was “sure” which correspondences would include such evidence. Since then, esthetics no longer seems to me a project encouraging our sense perception and the arts. Rather, I see it as theology changing horses. The way of my proof though was as much about philosophical arguments as about historical circumstances because I had to show how esthetic arguments could serve the theological project of saving the prophecies of Jesus Christ in the *Old Testament*.

Concerning “theory,” I am content with Spinoza’s advice that we approach a past text like any other natural phenomenon we want to understand—by means of science, i.e., checking the meaning of the words as they are used at the time, stating the used arguments, collecting the facts about their origin, searching for the authors and their intentions, and looking for the *one* hypothesis that could bring all the pieces together. Einstein and Infeld describe science in a similar way—as collecting facts and looking for the coherent hypothesis that can put them all into one story. Interestingly, they compare scientific method with that of a detective who after collecting a great many facts sits quietly in his armchair and thinks about a coherent explanation. “Suddenly, by Jove, he has it!”⁶⁸ He knows not only the explanation but also other things that must have happened as well. “Since he knows exactly where to look for it he may go out, if he likes, to collect further confirmation for his theory.”⁶⁹ I find this a pretty good description of what I experience when doing history of philosophy.

67. See Goldenbaum (2011b), 305–15.

68. Einstein/Infeld (1971), 4.

69. *Ibid.*, 4–5.