



Philosophy and its History: An Essay in the Philosophy of Philosophy

Graham Priest

CUNY Graduate Center

1 | INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY

There is clearly an intimate and distinctive relation between philosophy and its history. But what, exactly, that is, is not at all obvious, and raises a number of interesting questions. In what follows, I intend to address two such. These are as follows:

Question 1: The history of philosophy is an integral part of the study of philosophy in a way that, say, the history of science is not an integral part of the study science, and the history of economics is not an integral part of the history of economics. Why?

Question 2: The sciences clearly make progress. How one should best understand this is a somewhat vexed philosophical question; but whatever the answer, it seems clear that philosophy does not make progress in this way—if it makes progress at all. So what, if anything, constitutes progress in philosophy, and why?

Answers to these questions will, I hope, provide a number of insights into the nature of philosophy itself.

That nature is itself a vexed philosophical question, and one I do not intend to take head-on here. An answer to the question of what philosophy is could itself only be the result of an extended philosophical investigation. For present purposes, to indicate what philosophy is, it will suffice to give some examples of notable philosophical questions—the kinds of questions that philosophers, Ancient and Modern, East and West, try to answer.

- *Philosophy of Religion*: Some people believe that there is a god; some do not. Is there? And if there is, what is the nature of that god? Indeed, independent of whether or not there is a god, what would it take to make some entity or other a divinity?
- *Ethics*: Every person is faced with numerous ethical questions in life: how to spend their money, how to vote, and so on. Perhaps the most fundamental and general of these questions is: how should one live? What is a good life, and what makes it worth living?

- *Philosophy of Mind*: There are obvious differences between a person and a chair or a tree; but what exactly is it to be a person? Is a foetus a person? Someone who is brain-dead? Could a computational device ever be a person?
- *Aesthetics*: In 1917, Marcel Duchamp purchased a urinal from a local factory and exhibited it at an art exhibition in New York. Was it art? What is art? How does art relate to social institutions, beauty, the intentions of the artist?
- *Philosophy of Science*: Intuitively, space and time are very different kinds of things. Phenomenologically, they are entirely different. But contemporary science tells us that there is no real difference. What appears as a temporal separation for one observer can appear as a spatial separation for another. So how exactly are we to understand space and time so as to make sense of these things?

Doubtless, this is just a very small sample of the many philosophical questions I could have cited. But they will do for our purposes in what follows.

2 | FROM HISTORY TO PHILOSOPHY

With this background, let us turn to Question 1, concerning the relationship between philosophy and its history.

Let us be clear, for a start, that the relationship between philosophy and its history is very different from that between most subjects and their histories. Contemporary students of physics do not read Newton or Maxwell, let alone Aristotle. Contemporary students of history do not read Herodotus, Gibbon, or Macaulay (except, perhaps, just as historical documents). Yet an undergraduate education in philosophy would surely be inadequate if students read only philosophy written in the last 50 years.

Let us also be clear that the history of philosophy is not philosophy. The history of philosophy deals with questions such as: How did classical Chinese philosophy affect the development of Buddhist philosophy when Buddhism entered China? What, exactly, was Kant's understanding of the categorical imperative? How should one understand the more mystical parts of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and their relationship to the earlier parts of the text? What, exactly, is the relationship between Heidegger's phenomenology and Husserl's? Investigating such questions involves a scholarly knowledge of the texts in question, the languages they were written in, and their philosophical and sociological contexts. These are fascinating issues in their own right; but they are not philosophical questions.

This is not to say that one cannot *do* philosophy in engaging with historical texts. Of course one can: articulating and critiquing the ideas of past philosophers is often a sensible way of attacking a philosophical issue. Many of the best historians of philosophy do just this. But getting clear what a philosopher said, meant, and or even how they might best have articulated their view, is a quite different matter to figuring out whether such claims are true, that is figuring out whether their thought delivers the best solutions to the problems they were wrestling with.

Nor does it mean that one cannot exercise philosophical skills in doing the history of philosophy: one can exercise philosophical skills in doing many things. A recognised hermeneutical principle is that of charity. One should not interpret a text as saying something if one can interpret it as saying something that is philosophically more plausible. Determining which of two philosophical views is the more plausible is indeed a philosophical task. But the aim of the whole textual endeavour is not to get at the truth on some philosophical issue: it is to figure out the best interpretation of the text, a quite different goal.

So why are philosophers, *qua* philosophers, interested in the history of philosophy? Part of the answer is that it helps to get a sense of perspective on philosophical issues, and to understand them better. It is a truism that one comes to understand one's own language better when one learns a foreign language; and one comes to understand one's own society and culture better when one travels and learns about others. The differences one then sees throw them into perspective and foreground aspects of the familiar which would otherwise have been invisible. So it is with philosophy. To understand any philosophical view better, investigate views that differ from it. One will come to see features, strengths, weaknesses that were otherwise below the surface.

Of course, this can be only a (small) part of the answer. A native English speaker does not need to learn an historical language like classical Latin or Chinese to get a perspective on their native language. They have modern Italian or Chinese—and any other number of living languages—to do this. Similarly, a North American one does not need to study ancient India or Persia to get a perspective on their culture. They can do this by visiting contemporary India or Iran—or any other number of contemporary societies. So, again, to obtain a perspective on contemporary views on god—to take just one of our earlier examples—one does not need to read Confucius, Aquinas, Hume, or Marx. There is a wide variety of contemporary views about god which will do that job.

A much more important part of the answer to our question is that by studying the history of philosophy we find a rich source of ideas for approaching contemporary philosophical issues. The history of philosophy is a sort of philosophy mine. Let me give a couple of examples.

Example 1: There are many problems in medical ethics involving competing ethical responsibilities, such as balancing the rights of individuals and the duty of care. Suppose I am a doctor. A child in my care requires a blood transfusion or may well die. Their parents refuse to approve of the transfusion for religious reasons. What should I do? There are going to be no algorithmic answers to such questions. Arguably, the best answer to such questions lies in Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, practical wisdom—a virtue of judgement developed over time with practice, in coordination with the development of other virtues, such as empathy and beneficence. That answer is not to be found in many modern ethics texts.

Example 2: Postmodern philosophy is notoriously relativistic, against all absolutes concerning truth, knowledge, meaning. Such things are not new in philosophy. They were standard fare amongst the Ancient Greek sophists. Thus, Gorgias is reputed to have said: there is no truth; but if there were you could not know it; and if you did, you could not communicate it. Many of the arguments for such relativism were articulated much more carefully by the sophists than by many postmodern thinkers. And many objections to such relativism (often not considered by postmodern thinkers at all) were articulated by the likes of Plato. In considering contemporary postmodernism, one could do better than engage with the Ancient Greek thinkers.

Example 3: In contemporary discussions in the philosophy of religion by Western thinkers, it is not uncommon to find religion identified with theism. A religion without a god seems just not to occur to these philosophers. How much more enlightened their discussions would be—whatever points they wish to make—if only they were aware of some classical Buddhist philosophy. (Buddhism is an atheist religion.)

So much for a few examples. What they illustrate is how many contemporary philosophical debates can profitably be informed by a knowledge of the history of philosophy. A helpful thought here (put to me by the Australasian philosopher Denis Robinson) is that the history of philosophy is like a book of chess openings. Good chess players have a firm knowledge of these. Such is necessary to take them to a point of the game where they can exercise novelty and real creativity. And if they do not know these, if they are playing an opponent who knows them properly, they are likely to have lost the game already

by the time the opening phase is over. In a similar way, knowing the history of a philosophical issues is an important entry into understanding the subtleties of contemporary debates.

This is a useful analogy, but like all analogies, there are significant differences between the analogues. For one: philosophy is a very creative process. Creativity, and the progress this occasions, often involves breaking the accepted rules. This is obviously true in music, literature, and so on. It is equally true, if not more so, in philosophy. Philosophy is the epitome of thinking outside the box, of challenging things that have been taken for granted, and coming up with ideas that go against the current grain. I think that most great philosophers, East and West, Ancient and Modern, did this. Obviously, in playing chess one is not at liberty to break the rules!

Before we move on to our second question, it will be illuminating to consider a couple of responses to what I have just said.

Someone who favours an ahistorical education in philosophy might say ‘Yes, of course what you say is true; it remains the case that one does not have to study the history of philosophy to do good philosophy’. That of course is so. Doubtless, a gifted chess player can get by with only a sketchy knowledge of openings. But how much better would the chess player or philosopher be if they knew more? Why, indeed, would one cut oneself off from such a valuable resource? Philosophers are often dealing with issues that have been hammered over by great minds in history, or, at least, with issues that are structurally very similar. Those who do not know the history of the matter are likely to reinvent the wheel, even a wheel already well understood to be square.

Another sort of response would come from someone who says ‘Granted, what you say is true of philosophy; but are not other disciplines like this? Is not the history of science a fertile ground for new scientific ideas?’ The simple answer to this is ‘no’. Scientific progress is such that contemporary developments often make earlier ideas obsolete. No contemporary scientist is likely to get much inspiration from reading Newton, Maxwell, or Darwin. Their ideas have been absorbed; the parts that work, greatly improved; the parts that do not, junked. But it is a matter of fact that we philosophers are still getting new ideas by reading the classical texts of Plato, Hume, Nāgārjuna, Wittgenstein, and so on. These texts have been read and reread by generations of philosophers who continue to find novel inspiration in them. Just consider, for one example, how many times Plato’s ideas have generated novel philosophical positions—those of the Neo-Platonists, the Cambridge Platonists, contemporary mathematical Platonists. Indeed, it seems to me that it is a mark of a great philosophical text precisely that it has a richness that allows new generations of philosophy to draw novel ideas from its depths.

3 | PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

The considerations just traversed broach the matter of scientific progress and take us appropriately into the second of questions, concerning progress in philosophy. What, if anything, constitutes this?

The sciences—or certainly many of the natural sciences—make progress. What, exactly, constitutes this is a tough philosophical question. It is certainly not a simple matter of accumulation, since both theories and data can be kicked out in the process. However, scientific theories are clearly getting better in some sense. In some, again difficult to articulate, sense they seem to be getting closer to the truth. One way we can tell this is because of developments in technology. New theories make possible technology that older theories did not—and the technology works.

There would seem to be nothing similar in philosophy. New theories are certainly developed, but older theories make comebacks, albeit in a newer form. Again, just one example: Aristotelian virtue ethics has recently made a come-back in Western philosophy, after having been displaced for many centuries by deontological and consequentialist theories. And, to state the obvious, philosophical

theories do not give rise to either empirical predictions or new technology. We therefore have no similar touchstone of progress.

Moreover, to suppose that philosophy progressed in the same way as science would make a non-sense of how we teach philosophy. We do not, as in the sciences, teach received theories (even where something might be thought to be such) and their mastery. We explain different theories, and examine their strengths and weaknesses. Students are then expected to make up their own minds about what is correct and articulate a case for this.

Cynics might say (and sometimes do) that there is really no progress in philosophy: if there were, we would hardly be reading texts that are a couple of thousand years old. But I think that this view is just wrong, and is driven by the thought that philosophy should make progress in the way that science does. It does not. But how, then, does it progress?

For a start, many philosophical problems are very old, but philosophy interpenetrates with virtually every other discipline: physics, mathematics, history, art, economics—and developments in those disciplines throw up new philosophical problems (and occasionally, developments go in the other direction). Thus, developments in 19th century physics heralded debates about scientific realism; 20th century developments in medicine have posed problems in the ethics of resource management; the development of the camera and breaking away from representational art posed new challenges in aesthetics, etc.

Thus, one way in which philosophy progresses is in the discovery of new problems. It may seem a somewhat perverse sense of progress which counts new problems as a kind of progress. But it is not really so. Progress in mathematics is frequently delivered by the discovery of new problems (e.g., solving the continuum hypothesis); progress in biology can be delivered by new problems (e.g., determining the mechanism of inheritance); and so on. The problems serve to widen our intellectual horizons.

That said, if this were the only kind of progress that philosophy makes, the situation would be a rather sad one. A much more important kind of progress is a progress in our grasp of issues. As philosophical thought develops, we come to understand old questions better. We can formulate them more precisely; we know more about the possible answers, their implications, their viability. Philosophical progress is thus marked by a broadening and deepening of our understanding of problems and their possible solutions.

Let us come back to the chess analogy again. A contemporary grand master would almost certainly beat a grand master of 50 years ago most of the time. They may be no brighter, but the win because their understanding of the game, the possibilities of various positions and strategies, has benefited from the years of accumulated chess experience. Philosophy is traditionally defined (following Plato) as the love of wisdom. As a definition, this leaves a great deal to be desired. However, it has at least this much going for it: wisdom, whatever that is, is intimately connected with understanding. The definition then tracks at least this aspect of philosophy.

To make more concrete the sort of progress I have in mind, let me give just a few examples.

Example 1: There are many very well known arguments for the existence of a Christian God. Because of, amongst other things, developments in modern logic and probability theory, we now understand these arguments much better: how best to articulate them, the possibilities inherent in variations, the problems that they have. And, for what it is worth, there is now a general (though not universal) consensus, that none of these works.

Example 2: Traditional theories of deontological and consequentialist ethical theories are well known. The works of Kant and Bentham are standard fare for ethicists; and so are their problems. Over the last 50 years, we have seen newer versions of these theories, in the work of, for example, Rawls

and Singer, which reformulate the older versions, and address some of the standard problems (whilst throwing up, of course, new problems of their own!).

Example 3: Buddhist philosophy has a distinctive view of the self—sometimes claimed, with some justice, to be similar to Humes; though Buddhist philosophers had the view some 2,000 years earlier, and articulated it much more than Hume ever did. According to this view, there is no self, that is, there is no part of a person which is constant, exists while the person exists, and defines the person as that very person. Of course, we undeniably have a *sense* of self. If there is no self, what is it, then, of which we have a sense. The obvious contemporary answer is that it is a fictional object. For obvious reasons, Buddhist philosophers had no theory of fictional objects to draw on. Contemporary philosophy, by contrast, does; and this can be profitably applied in articulating the Buddhist theory.

4 | PHILOSOPHY AND ART

A central sense of progress in philosophy, then, is that philosophy makes progress by increasing the depth and breadth of our understanding. In the light of this, let us now return to Question 1, about the importance of the history of philosophy to philosophy itself.

When we read great old texts, we now see more in them than did those who wrote them. We understand better the possibilities, implications, and applications, of the views expressed therein. This is not because we are smarter than Plato, Kant, or whoever. We have just had a lot longer to think about these things, and we can benefit from developments in logic, psychology, and other areas. In a way, it is like the chess master with 50 years' more experience. In another way, it is like reading great works of literature, seeing classic plays, hearing great works of music. Every time one does so, one can come to understand these things better, see or hear things in them that one had not seen or heard before, appreciate their structure and technique, and so on.

Putting matters in this way suggests another response these ruminations might occasion, which it will again be illuminating to consider. It might well be thought, given what I have said, that progress in philosophy is like progress in literary criticism, musicology, and similar disciplines. So philosophy is not like science; it is like these disciplines. (Note that I am not talking about progress in art itself. Whether, and in what way, that makes progress is another matter entirely.)

Now, maybe progress of the kind that I have described does occur in these disciplines. Indeed, maybe some of the things that go on in these disciplines are philosophy! But there is an enormous difference between philosophy and these disciplines. The point of the disciplines of art appreciation is, well, just that, appreciating works of art. By contrast, though in philosophy we may come to appreciate old texts better, this not an end in itself: it is pursued in the service of something else. Philosophy is a *truth seeking* activity in a way that art appreciation is not. Philosophy is driven by questions to which we seek answers—and not just questions about texts. The answers posed may be true or false. And however much it may be impossible to find definitive answers, we may still form reasonable views about which are the best.

Of course, the answers we come to may well not (in fact, probably won't) command universal assent. Rational people may disagree over matters. Moreover, the answers are always provisional, in the sense that we may rationally change our minds as new theories appear, and we come to understand old theories better. Actually, there is nothing specific to philosophy here. This is a quite general feature of rational investigation.

So, as we have seen, it is a mistake to assimilate philosophy to either science or artistic appreciation. In some ways it is like science: it is truth-seeking. In some ways it is like art criticism: it involves a deepening of understanding. But philosophy is neither of these things. It is *sui generis*. It deals with

important questions which are never going to go away, just because definitive answers are not to be expected. But it tackles them in a disciplined and critical way, which increases our understanding of problems and solutions alike.

5 | CONCLUSION

So, in conclusion: we have been focussing on two questions. Why is the history of philosophy integral to philosophy itself? In what way does philosophy make progress? I have argued that the answer to the first question is that the history of philosophy serves philosophy by being a resource for arguments and ideas. I have argued that the answer to the second question is that philosophy progresses by increasing our depth and breadth of the understanding of problems and their solutions. In the course of our discussion, we have seen some things about the nature of philosophy itself as well—most prominently that, although philosophy is like science in some ways, and art appreciation in others, it is essentially different from both.

I started with some examples of philosophical issues. We now have another to hand. For we have been engaged with a philosophical issue in this talk: what is the relationship between philosophy and its history? And whether or not you agree with the conclusions I have come to, I hope that the discussion has increased our understanding of matters, so that we made at least a little philosophical progress.¹

How to cite this article: Priest G. Philosophy and its history: An essay in the philosophy of philosophy. *Analytic Philos.* 2020;61:297–303. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phib.12190>

¹This is a written version of talks that have been given in a number of universities in Australasia, Asia, Europe, and the USA. It was given at the 9th *Analytic Philosophy* Symposium, University of Austin, Texas. I am grateful to the members of those audiences for their helpful comments and criticisms.