



PHILOSOPHY AND ITS HISTORY

*Aims and Methods in the Study of
Early Modern Philosophy*

Edited by

MOGENS LÆRKE, JUSTIN E. H. SMITH,
and ERIC SCHLIESSER

Philosophy and Its History

This page intentionally left blank

Philosophy and Its History

*Aims and Methods in the Study of
Early Modern Philosophy*



Edited by

MOGENS LÆRKE,
JUSTIN E.H. SMITH,

and

ERIC SCHLIESSER

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other
countries.

Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

© Oxford University Press 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a
retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior
permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law,
by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization.
Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the
Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Philosophy and its history : aims and methods in the study of early
modern philosophy / edited by Mogens Lærke, Justin E.H. Smith, and
Eric Schliesser.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-19-985716-6 (alk. paper) – ISBN 978-0-19-985714-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Philosophy, Modern—History. I. Lærke, Mogens, 1971- editor of compilation.

II. Smith, Justin E. H., editor of compilation. III. Schliesser, Eric,

1971- editor of compilation.

B791.P435 2013

190.9'03—dc23

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Contents

<i>Contributors</i>	vii
Introduction—MOGENS LÆRKE, JUSTIN E. H. SMITH, AND ERIC SCHLIESSER	I
1. The Anthropological Analogy and the Constitution of Historical Perspectivism—MOGENS LÆRKE	7
2. The History of Philosophy as Past and as Process —JUSTIN E. H. SMITH	30
3. Philosophy and Genealogy: Ways of Writing History of Philosophy—KOEN VERMEIR	50
4. Understanding the Argument through Then-Current Public Debates or My Detective Method of History of Philosophy—URSULA GOLDENBAUM	71
5. The Contingency of Philosophical Problems—JOANNE WAUGH AND ROGER ARIEW	91
6. Philosophical Problems in the History of Philosophy: What Are They?—LEO CATANA	115
7. Philosophizing Historically/Historicizing Philosophy: Some Spinozistic Reflections—JULIE R. KLEIN	134
8. Is the History of Philosophy a Family Affair? The Examples of Malebranche and Locke in the Cousinian School—DELPHINE KOLESNIK-ANTOINE	159
9. The Taming of Philosophy—MICHAEL DELLA ROCCA	178

10. Philosophic Prophecy—ERIC SCHLIESSER	209
11. Philosophical Systems and Their History—ALAN NELSON	236
12. Charitable Interpretations and the Political Domestication of Spinoza, or, Benedict in the Land of the Secular Imagination—YITZHAK Y. MELAMED	258
13. Mediating between Past and Present: Descartes, Newton, and Contemporary Structural Realism—MARY DOMSKI	278
14. What Has History of Science to Do with History of Philosophy?—TAD M. SCHMALTZ	301
<i>Bibliography</i>	325
<i>Index Nominum</i>	353
<i>Index Rerum</i>	359

Contributors

Roger Ariew is Professor and chair, Department of Philosophy, University of South Florida. Ariew is the author of *Descartes and the Last Scholastics* (Cornell University Press, 1999; 2nd edition, *Descartes among the Scholastics*, Brill, 2011)—co-author of *Historical Dictionary of Descartes and Cartesian Philosophy* (Scarecrow Press, 2003; 2nd edition forthcoming), editor and translator of such works as *Descartes, Philosophical Essays* (Hackett, 2000) and *Pascal, Pensées* (Hackett, 2005), and editor of the quarterly journal *Perspectives on Science: Historical, Philosophical, Social* (MIT Press).

Leo Catana is associate professor at the Division of Philosophy at the University of Copenhagen, and director of the Centre for Neoplatonic Virtue Ethics. Author of *The Historiographical Concept “System of Philosophy”: Its Origin, Nature, Influence, and Legitimacy* (E.J. Brill, 2008); *The Concept of Contraction in Giordano Bruno’s Philosophy* (Ashgate, 2005), and of numerous articles on Renaissance philosophy and Platonism in the Enlightenment period.

Michael Della Rocca is Andrew Downey Orrick Professor of Philosophy at Yale University. He is the author of two books, *Representation and the Mind–Body Problem in Spinoza* (Oxford University Press, 1996) and *Spinoza* (Routledge, 2008), and numerous articles in early modern philosophy and in contemporary metaphysics.

Mary Domski is associate professor of philosophy, University of New Mexico. She is the co-editor of *Discourse on a New Method: Reinvigorating the Marriage of History and Philosophy of Science* (Open Court, 2010), and has published a number of articles on Descartes, Locke, Newton, and Kant with special interest in the relationship between mathematics and philosophy.

Ursula Goldenbaum is associate professor of philosophy, Emory University. She is the author of *Appell an das Publikum. Die öffentliche Debatte in der*

deutschen Aufklärung 1687–1796. 2 vols. (Akademie Verlag, 2004), *Einführung in die Philosophie Spinozas* (Hagen, 1993), co-editor of *Infinitesimal Differences: Controversies between Leibniz and His Contemporaries* (de Gruyter, 2008), and author of numerous articles on a wide variety of topics in early modern philosophy.

Julie R. Klein is associate professor of philosophy, Villanova University. She has published numerous articles on Medieval Jewish philosophy and Early Modern philosophy as well as in contemporary French reception of Spinoza.

Delphine Kolesnik-Antoine is associate professor of philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon. Member of the *Centre d'Études en Rhétorique, Philosophie et Histoire des idées* (CERPHI, UMR 5037). Author of *L'Homme cartésien. La "force qu'a lame de mouvoir le corps." Descartes, Malebranche* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), *Descartes. Une politique des passions* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), and of numerous articles on Cartesian philosophy.

Mogens Lærke is Senior Research Fellow, CNRS, France, and professor of philosophy, University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Member of the *Centre d'Études en Rhétorique, Philosophie et Histoire des idées* (CERPHI, UMR 5037) at the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon. Author of *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza. La genèse d'une opposition complexe* (Champion, 2008) and of some fifty articles, mainly on early modern philosophy. Editor of *The Use of Censorship in the Enlightenment* (Brill, 2009) and co-editor of *The Philosophy of the Young Leibniz* (Franz Steiner, 2009).

Yitzhak Y. Melamed is associate professor of philosophy at Johns Hopkins University. He is the author of *Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance and Thought* (Oxford, 2012) and of several articles on Spinoza and Descartes. He is the co-editor of *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise* (with Michael Rosenthal: Cambridge, 2010) and *Spinoza and German Idealism* (with Eckart Förster: Cambridge 2012), and the editor of *The Young Spinoza* (Oxford: Forthcoming).

Alan Nelson is professor of philosophy, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of a large number of influential articles in Early Modern philosophy, especially the Rationalists, and philosophy of economics.

Eric Schliesser is BOF Research Professor, philosophy and moral sciences, Ghent University. Co-editor of *New Voices on Adam Smith* (Routledge, 2006)

and *Interpreting Newton* (Cambridge, 2012) as well as the author of *Adam Smith* (Forthcoming). He has published widely in philosophy of economics and early modern philosophy, including papers on Hume, Spinoza, Newton, Berkeley, Adam Smith, Sophie de Grouchy, and Huygens.

Tad M. Schmaltz is professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He has published articles and book chapters on various topics in early modern philosophy, and is the author of *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul* (Oxford, 1996), *Radical Cartesianism* (Cambridge, 2002), and *Descartes on Causation* (Oxford, 2008). He is a co-editor of the *Historical Dictionary of Descartes and Cartesian Philosophy* (Scarecrow, 2003), and is the editor of *Receptions of Descartes* (Routledge, 2005). Most recently he and the historian of science Seymour Mauskopf have co-edited the collection, *Integrating History and Philosophy of Science: Problems and Prospects* (Springer, 2012).

Justin E. H. Smith is professor of philosophy at Concordia University. He is the author of *Divine Machines: Leibniz and the Sciences of Life* (Princeton University Press, 2011), as well as the forthcoming *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Early Modern Philosophy and the Invention of Race*, also with Princeton University Press. He has edited or co-edited a number of volumes on the history of early modern philosophy.

Koen Vermeir is Senior Research Fellow, UMR 7219, CNRS, Paris. His most recent publications include the co-edited volumes *The Science of Sensibility. Reading Edmund Burke's Philosophical Enquiry* (Springer, 2012), *States of Secrecy. From Alchemy to the Atomic Bomb* (Special Issue of *British Journal for the History of Science*, 2012), and *Malebranche et l'imagination puissante* (Special Issue of *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia*, 2012). He also recently published a number of articles on early modern philosophy, science and technology, as well as on science policy.

Joanne Waugh is American Foundation for Greek Language and professor of Greek culture at the University of South Florida. She also serves as director of Graduate Studies and associate chair for the Department of Philosophy. She has published articles and book chapters on topics in ancient Greek philosophy, as well as aesthetics and art criticism, the philosophy of language, the history and philosophy of science, and feminist philosophy. She served as co-editor of *Hypatia* from 1995 to 1998, and of *Feminists Doing Ethics* (2002) and *Philosophical Feminism and Popular Culture* (forthcoming). She is currently working on a book on Plato's *Sokratikoi Logoi* in their historical context.

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

ALMOST ALL PHILOSOPHERS agree that one cannot be properly trained in current philosophy without knowing something of either the historical development of the discipline or without some familiarity with the writings of certain canonical figures. Beyond acknowledging this requirement, however, there is very little agreement as to what relationship, exactly, the study of the history of philosophy should have to contemporary philosophy. Moreover, given that there is little consensus about the purpose that the historiography of philosophy should serve within philosophy as a whole, there is also little consensus about how historians of philosophy should go about their work, that is to say, about what kind of methodology to follow when approaching past philosophical texts. This volume takes a measure of the current range of views on this complicated issue and aims to show a way forward, for specialists in the history of philosophy as well as for philosophers with a theoretical interest in the question of the relationship of philosophy to its history and histories.

While there are many further, finer-grained distinctions to make, it seems that in the English-speaking world of philosophy at present there are two principal ways of thinking about this relationship. First, the history of philosophy is held to be a source of ideas and arguments that may be of use in current philosophy, and it is to be studied as a way of advancing in the resolution of problems of current interest. Second, it is supposed that the history of philosophy is to be studied and understood for its own sake and on its own terms, even when the problems of interest to the figures in this history have since fallen off the philosophical agenda. Representatives of the first line of thinking, who might be called “appropriationist,” criticize defenders of the second approach, who might in turn be dubbed “contextualists,” for abandoning the aim of making a positive contribution to current philosophy and instead engaging in “mere history.”

Representatives of the contextualist approach criticize the appropriationists for sacrificing the original, intended meaning of historical doctrines on the altar of current philosophical fashion, and thus being culpable of a certain species of revisionism. The appropriationists can return the allegations made against them by arguing that there just is no way to really engage with the thoughts of a past philosopher other than by confronting his or her arguments with our own. Learning from past philosophers, and thus also paying tribute to their greatness, is necessarily to pull historical arguments out of the storehouse of history, dusting them off, and reactivating them in our own contemporary context. Consequently, the use of the history of philosophy for philosophy does not lie in the correct historical account of what the intentions of some past philosopher were but instead in the possible solutions that can be extracted from these texts to perennial problems of philosophy. In this fashion, it is simply not philosophically relevant whether the rational reconstructions of past philosophers one develops correspond to the intentions of that philosopher, as long as these reconstructions yield conceptual results and address contemporary concerns in an interesting way.

The contextualists, in turn, defend the principle laid down by Quentin Skinner that “[n]o agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done.” But to place Plato or Descartes or Hume in conversation with our own intellectual community, the contextualists worry, is inevitably to impute such unacceptable meanings or actions to past philosophers. It may be true that there is some set of problems that all of these thinkers were focused upon, and that continues to interest us today. But the problem with the “conversational” approach to the history of philosophy is that it is necessarily a one-way conversation: the long-dead figures from the past cannot respond with any more than what they have already said, whereas the living can continue adding and revising and advancing. The contextualist believes that the most urgent thing to do for the scholar of the history of philosophy is to make sure that we have properly understood the full set of reasons a historical figure had for addressing a certain philosophical problem and for attempting a certain solution to it.

It appears, then, that historians of philosophy are caught between their own Scylla and Charybdis, between either being untrue to the aims and intentions of the historical figures or abandoning the project of philosophy altogether in order to engage in social and cultural history, paleography, or the minute forensic work of the archival researcher. Meanwhile, a non-negligible part of the readership of the scholarly output of historians of, for example,

early modern philosophy is instructors and students in introductory courses on the so-called Empiricists and Rationalists; these readers seek illumination of and background material to the canonical figures they teach and study. The potential tensions between the needs of scholarship and service to the discipline have barely been theorized.

In addition to the contextualist and appropriationist approaches practiced in Anglo-American philosophy, there is a third approach more familiar from Continental philosophy, in which one's philosophical position is developed dialectically with a tradition that is often simultaneously constructed for that purpose. Sometimes work done in this mode sets the agenda for renewed detailed engagement with the history of philosophy. Scholars working in this tradition tend not to agree with the contextualists that the best thing to do is to let past figures "speak for themselves" and even tend to doubt that we can know what they were saying independent of our own interest in using them for some end or another of our own. But they also often disagree with the appropriationists, who tend to mine past philosophy for timelessly good arguments; for Continental historians, philosophy, as a dialectical activity, tends to be understood as a fundamentally historical process rather than a timeless source of truths. Thus, a Continental historian will not mine the past for usable nuggets, but will rather attempt to build on the past in a way that is both attentive to it and, at the same time, seeking to overcome its historically conditioned limitations. A scholar in this tradition is, like the appropriationist, eminently a philosopher rather than a historian, to the extent that she rejects the task of recovering the past figure's world, and instead prefers to use the past figure to make sense of her own world. As with the appropriationist, though, there is the lingering danger that this sort of scholarship does not do justice to the actual concerns of the historical figure whose work has selectively been called into service.

What, then, is to be done? Most significantly, the once widespread view of history as strictly irrelevant to the current practice of philosophy, warranted by a certain interpretation of logical positivism, has by now gone almost completely extinct. As a result, in most philosophical circles one no longer needs to expend any effort justifying an interest in Descartes, say, as such. One needs only to give an account of how Descartes relates to one's philosophical interests. Another significant development in the English-speaking world has been an increase in attention to original-language texts, to the less familiar or unpublished works of philosophers, to the so-called minor figures with whom the major thinkers were in contact, and to the development of ideas and arguments over the course of a philosopher's life. Thirty years ago, among

English-speaking philosophers the names “Descartes” and “Kant” were taken to stand for fixed sets of views, and ones that could be expressed in English just as well as in German, French, or Latin. Today, as a result of the work of Daniel Garber and many others, this once common approach to historical figures now seems to most researchers far too simplistic, and today almost everyone at least strives for a somewhat higher-resolution picture of the actual historical person who stands behind the familiar arguments. There has also been, in recent years, a growing interest in questions of methodology in the history of philosophy.

This volume aims to create an inclusive discussion such that a range of different methodological approaches from different traditions of philosophy can be read alongside each other and be seen in sometimes very critical conversation with each other. In order to achieve this we invited leading specialists in what is known as “early modern” philosophy (roughly the period between Descartes and Kant) to address the methodology of the history of philosophy.

The present collection reflects the rapid internationalization of research that has opened up the field to a wide range of approaches much less (if at all) present on the horizon of Anglo-American scholarship, say, thirty years ago. This increase in exchange between various national traditions has heightened the sensitivity among scholars to methodological issues. Moreover, it has given rise to a sort of second-order, metaphilosophical problem. For the historian of philosophy trying to address these different approaches in a balanced fashion, and extracting something useful and coherent from them, questioning the role of her discipline within philosophy as a whole is no longer just a question of how philosophy relates to itself and its history. It is also a question of how various traditions for thinking about such meta-philosophical issues relate *to each other*, and of reflecting on the conditions under which these traditions may inform each other in a productive way.

We have assembled prominent and upcoming scholars, with a wide range of philosophical orientations, to contribute new essays on the subject of the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy. The contributors include both specialists in the history of philosophy as well as philosophers who work primarily on current problems in systematic philosophy but who have a pronounced interest in history. The contributors have been chosen among specialists working in the area of early modern philosophy, broadly defined. This choice does of course to some extent reflect the areas of specialization of the editors. There are, however, also good, intrinsic reasons for focusing on this period. Ancient philosophy, and to some extent medieval

philosophy, are areas in the history of philosophy that are already and necessarily very much informed by historical considerations. It is generally recognized that any philosophical exchange between contemporary philosophers and ancient philosophy requires the historical work of philologists and historians in order to be possible at all. Not so with early modern philosophy. Early modern philosophers are often taken to be those who are “closest” to ourselves in terms of basic problems, concerns, and approaches. They often write in the vernacular rather than Latin, thus reducing the need for translations. For these reasons, it is with the early modern philosophers that basic questions of how to approach them—as if they were colleagues with whom you discuss philosophy in the hallway of the department, or rather as if they were historical aliens speaking a different philosophical tongue—come up with the greatest urgency. From the point of view of practical methodology, the relation between early modern philosophy and philosophy is the most problematic, and therefore also the most interesting, interface between the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy. The volume will, however, be of interest to a wide variety of specialists, teachers, and reflective students of other periods as well.

The contributions to the volume all seek to go beyond the standard ways of doing history of philosophy sketched here. The chapters can be roughly divided into four general orientations. First, the largest group of chapters (Lærke, Smith, Vermeir, Goldenbaum, and Waugh and Ariew) advocate methods that promote history of philosophy as an unapologetic, autonomous enterprise with its own criteria within philosophy. Within this group, Lærke, Smith, Vermeir, and Goldenbaum offer competing ways to professionalize the history of philosophy by focusing on its proper method. They offer exemplars from a wide variety of disciplinary practices: Lærke turns to anthropology to conceptualize a notion of historical truth embedded in a controversy; Smith turns to archaeology as a model for an interdisciplinary approach to the history of philosophy; Vermeir explores the merits of genealogical approaches; and Goldenbaum models the historian of philosophy on the careful detective who seeks out clues. The first three chapters also include trenchant criticism of Skinner’s influential methodological writings. Ariew and Waugh make the case for the benefits of a contextual approach to history of philosophy and remind us of the days when factually accurate history of philosophy could not be taken for granted.

Second, three chapters (Catana, Klein, and Kolesnik-Antoine) can be seen as historicizing the history of philosophy from within. They argue that history of philosophy without historiography is blind to highly relevant features

of its past. Catana focuses his account on the development of the very idea of a “systematic philosophy.” Kolesnik-Antoine explores how an image of what Cartesian philosophy essentially is was constructed by nineteenth-century scholars. Klein explores the methodological lessons that can be drawn from within the past philosophical texts we study, focusing in particular on Spinoza’s conception of philosophical and non-philosophical readers in order to discuss what kinds of readers of philosophical text *we* are, and *must* be, from a Spinozist perspective.

Third, four chapters (Della Rocca, Schliesser, Nelson, and Melamed) argue for history of philosophy as a means toward making contributions to contemporary philosophy. In particular, they agree that the history of philosophy plays a crucial role in overcoming the confines of present philosophy. Drawing on the principle of sufficient reason, Della Rocca takes aim at what he calls the “method of intuition,” which he claims privileges common sense. Nelson also expresses reservations about the role of common sense in the way the contemporary emphasis on enduring problems in philosophy blinds us to the systematic nature of significant (and often incompatible) philosophical projects of the past and present. Yet another attack on common sense is mounted by Melamed, who argues against the principle of charity, which he claims prevents us from using the history of philosophy as a way to improve our philosophical understanding. Schliesser advocates creating new concepts through which past and present philosophy can be fused. Della Rocca and Schliesser argue their case by re-telling the history of the origins of analytic philosophy. Representative of all four chapters is Nelson’s insistence that there is a crucial difference between an analytical presentation, which he embraces, and substantive analytical philosophical commitments, which he rejects for the historian of philosophy.

Finally, two chapters (Domski, Schmaltz) explore the relationship between the history of philosophy and the history of science. They both do so by deploying the resources of a classic (1992) article by Margaret Wilson. Against the hopes of the generation following Thomas Kuhn, Schmaltz argues that history of philosophy and history of science are distinct approaches that can sometimes learn from each other but should remain separate. By contrast, Domski argues that a more integrated approach is possible, but only if we abandon the idea that the past is a reservoir of conceptual resources. Rather she insists that philosophical reflection on the past can enrich the foundations of present debates.

The Anthropological Analogy and the Constitution of Historical Perspectivism

Mogens Lærke

1. Introduction

IT IS A noteworthy fact that among historians of early modern philosophy the question of methodology, i.e., of *how* it should be done, often tends to be swallowed up by worries about *why* it should be done. To some extent, it is also an unsurprising fact. To be sure, Gary Hatfield is right to say that “there is little reason for today’s contextually oriented historians to consider themselves lonely revolutionaries. Nor should they bemoan a lack of appreciation from ahistorical colleagues.”¹ Nonetheless, the history of philosophy remains a subordinate topic in most Anglo-Saxon philosophy departments. Moreover, framing the question in this fashion has become somewhat of a standard approach. Hence, even if their philosophical colleagues may no longer scoff (so much) at the history of philosophy and no longer ask (as much) for justification as previously for the peculiar activity historians of philosophy are engaged in, the latter largely continue to behave as if it was the case.

It must however be possible to study the history of philosophy in a way that is both methodologically conscious and does not sound like a perpetual excuse. Why that is desirable is not only a question of institutional self-vindication. The apologetic mode of methodological discourse has done much damage in creating considerable confusion about the kind of truth historians of philosophy are supposed to dislodge from past philosophical texts. In this chapter, I say something about what is required for the establishment

1. Hatfield (2005), 88–89.

of a historiography of philosophy overcoming this problem, i.e., what I call an unapologetic historiography of philosophy. Next, and more important, I discuss one way of studying the history of philosophy that satisfies those requirements. I argue how an oft-repeated comparison between the historiography of philosophy and contemporary cultural anthropology, habitually invoked in order to support arguments in favor of relativist if not outright skeptical arguments about historical truth, can be put to a more constructive use. First, by spelling out the epistemological implications of some methodological intuitions most acutely formulated by anthropologists, I sketch out a method for the historiography of philosophy dubbed *historical perspectivism*. This method stresses the role that contextually internal perspectives play in the constitution of the true historical meaning of past philosophical texts. By such internal perspectives, I understand interpretations of texts developed by agents moving within the relevant historical context, i.e., agents who took an active part in the historical debates to which the text is a contribution. Finally, I discuss how historical perspectivism is also a form of *historical actualism*, in that it excludes from the horizon of correct historical reconstruction perspectives or interpretations that are merely contextually *possible*, including only those that are actually deployed within the relevant context.

2. *Requirements for an Unapologetic Historiography of Philosophy*

I believe that an unapologetic historiography of philosophy requires that we respect the following three points.

First, one must do away with the misconception that the historiography of philosophy will *ever* manage to justify itself vis-à-vis other sub-disciplines by posing as philosophy *simpliciter*. Requiring that historians of philosophy should simultaneously “do philosophy” puts them in the impossible position of having to cater for historical exactitude and philosophical truth at the same time, constantly running from one camp to the other. One readily available issue from this exhausting exercise is to mediate between these two poles by means of a philosophy of history, defending the idea that there is something inherently historical about the philosophical enterprise as such. Hegel’s history of philosophy is the most famous variant of such a strategy. Charles Taylor is a more recent example of a historian of philosophy taking that route.² While often ingenious,

2. Taylor (1984), 17–30.

solutions of this kind, however, suffer from one fatal strategic flaw. They require that our philosophical colleagues be converted to the philosophy of history proposed before they are properly conditioned to see the value of the history of philosophy. But most of them are as unlikely to do that as they are to recognize the value of the history of philosophy in the first place.³ Justifying the historiography of philosophy requires that the discipline be defined in such a way that it caters *equally* for a wide range of possible philosophical positions and not only for positions that fall within the category of philosophy of history. However, the most straightforward option for doing that is equally desisting from catering for them at all. Historians of philosophy would then simply behave toward their colleagues in other branches of philosophy as the latter already behave toward each other, including toward historians of philosophy. It would be perceived as unreasonable if historians of philosophy demanded that contemporary epistemologists should conduct their research in such a way that it would be helpful for the historiography of philosophy. So why should the reverse be the case?

Next, it should be emphasized that the historiography of philosophy deals with the interpretation of past philosophical texts.⁴ Whatever counts as “philosophical” is a matter of discussion and subject to considerable historical variation. One may also wonder when exactly it is that a philosophical text becomes part of the “past.” However, it is uncontroversial that the interpretation of past philosophical texts is indeed what the historian of philosophy is concerned with. This does not imply that traces of historical practices other than writing, such as, for example, scientific measurement and experimentation, are irrelevant for the study of the history of philosophy.⁵ It does not mean either that what counts as past philosophical text should necessarily be narrowly defined as words written on pages.⁶ It simply means that the study of whatever counts as non-textual traces by definition only is relevant for the historian of philosophy to the extent that they are conducive for understanding the meaning of primary texts. Now, it is a radically different question to ask about the correct interpretation of a text than to ask why we should take an interest in or adopt the position it propounds. The historian of philosophy must then, *qua* historian, emphatically distinguish the levels of *meaning* and *truth* of historical texts and restrict his professional business

3. For a reaction of this kind, see Graham (1982), 37–52.

4. See Garber (2001), 235; Kenny (2005), 22.

5. See Vermeir, this volume.

6. See Smith, this volume.

to the reconstruction of the former. In other words, he must from the outset be emphatically indifferent to the philosophical merits of the doctrine under scrutiny and focus exclusively on the historical meaning of the texts. Such unapologetic antiquarianism is not valuable for philosophy *in spite of* its disregard for the concerns of “real” philosophers.⁷ In fact, being unapologetically antiquarian is a necessary condition for having any such value. For, as Michael Ayers and Daniel Garber note, “we must certainly understand past philosophies before we can learn either from their insights or from their mistakes.”⁸

Finally, the historian of philosophy cannot do without a principled conception of what *true historical meaning* of past texts *is*, i.e., about what it *means* to have acquired a correct historical interpretation of a past philosophy. Indeed, the question concerning the nature of true historical meaning, or of what will count as a correct historical interpretation and why, is the one genuine philosophical question—and a meta-philosophical question at it—with which the historian of philosophy should be concerned, much in the same way as a moral philosopher is concerned with what morality is, an epistemologist with what truth is, and a metaphysician with what being is. Moreover, the historiography of philosophy cannot do without a corresponding method for accessing this true historical meaning. This requirement should, however, by no means be taken as a rejection of methodological pluralism. There still can be, indeed are, different types of historiography of philosophy with different assumptions about the nature of true historical meaning.

Hence, to summarize: (i) the historiography of philosophy is an independent sub-discipline of philosophy and is not accountable to any other sub-discipline; (ii) it is concerned with the correct historical interpretation of past philosophical texts, not with the philosophical merits of the doctrines it reconstructs; and (iii) it cannot do without some notion about the nature of true historical meaning, including a corresponding method for dislodging it from the texts. These three points summarize the fundamental requirements for an unapologetic historiography of philosophy.

In the following sections, I turn to the second and more substantial part of this chapter. It concerns *one* way in which I believe it is possible to satisfy these requirements. It is a methodology that I have dubbed “historical perspectivism.” In order to preempt fatal misunderstanding, it should be noted that other theories labeled “historical perspectivism” already exist, but that

7. See Garber (2005), 145.

8. See Garber and Ayers (1998), 4.

these homonymous theories have little in common with what I propose. Among philosophers, “historical perspectivism” evokes the theses developed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, where he complained that the writing of history should be put in the service of “life” and that nineteenth-century German history writing failed to do that. It is not a moustache I have any intention of growing. For a Nietzschean, the very ambition of writing unapologetic history of philosophy would undoubtedly seem like yet another fiction about writing a *history* which is not already a *use* of history, and dismiss it as an “antiquarian” historiography of the kind denounced by Nietzsche as “a repulsive rage for blind for collecting, a restless raking together of everything that ever existed.”⁹ For those better acquainted with literary theory, “historical perspectivism” is also associated with a particular type of approach to literary works from about half a century ago, mainly represented by Erich Auerbach. Auerbach himself thought of his historical perspectivism in terms of a “historical relativism,” although he denied that any skeptical conclusions should be drawn from it.¹⁰ Like it is for Nietzsche, “historical perspectivism” is for Auerbach a theory according to which the historian necessarily is involved in the constitution of the historical truth he discovers. It thus turns on the idea that *contextually external* perspectives, and in particular our own, necessarily determine how we construct the meaning of historical texts. These brands of “historical perspectivism” are unlikely to have much appeal to contemporary historians of philosophy. Fortunately, they have little in common with the position I advocate in the following, namely, that *contextually internal* perspectives on past philosophical texts are constitutive of the true historical meaning of those texts.

3. *The Anthropological Analogy*

When reading various methodological pieces written by historians of philosophy over the last fifty years, one cannot help being struck by how often past philosophical texts are conveyed as products of some alien culture and the historian of philosophy correspondingly described as a sort of intellectual time-traveler. The image, of course, has a distinguished pedigree. Descartes famously writes in *Discours de la méthode* that “conversing with those of past centuries is much the same as traveling,” explaining that “it is good to know

9. See Nietzsche (1983), 75.

10. See Auerbach (1967), 262.

something of the customs of various peoples, so that we may judge our own more soundly and not think that everything contrary to our own ways is irrational, as those who have seen nothing of the world ordinarily do.”¹¹ In his contribution to Peter Hare’s *Doing Philosophy Historically*, Daniel Garber quotes Descartes’s text when accounting for his own practice of “disinterested history.”¹² By traveling foreign intellectual lands, he argues, we will be rewarded with a “certain perspective on our own lives.”¹³ Along similar lines, Quentin Skinner argues that doing intellectual history may teach us how “those features of our own arrangements which we may be disposed to accept as traditional or even ‘timeless’ truths may in fact be the merest contingencies of our peculiar history and social structure.”¹⁴ To a great many historians of philosophy, the value of studying past philosophical texts is directly proportional to the extent to which grasping their meaning forces us to challenge our own basic epistemic assumptions.¹⁵ It is, however, far from clear that there is any point in traveling into the lands of past philosophy if we do this only to behave like tourists strolling through the historical texts like freshly disembarked cruise guests pouring into the local market, hunting for exotic souvenirs vaguely reminding us of other worlds than our own. We need a clearly formulated notion of how to go about grasping the truth of a foreign philosophy steeped in a historically distant intellectual culture.

In this context an oft-repeated and yet underexploited analogy between the historiography of philosophy and cultural anthropology can be of some help. The analogy is often invoked by historians of philosophy when stressing the difficulty of gaining access to the meaning of past philosophy, arguing that understanding, say, Francis Bacon, is just as difficult as decoding the culture of pygmies in Cameroon. Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, points out that the study of “culturally and intellectually alien periods in the history of philosophy may make us aware of modes of philosophical thought and enquiry whose forms and presuppositions are so different from ours that we are unable to discover sufficient agreement in concepts and standards to provide grounds for deciding between the rival and incompatible claims embodied in such modes without begging the question,” and he adds: “that precisely

11. Descartes (1984–1991), I, 113.

12. Garber (1988a), 34–37.

13. *Ibid.*, 35.

14. Skinner (1969), 52.

15. See, for example, Williams (2006), 258–59, 263–64, or Rorty (1984), 51.

the same type of issue could obviously arise in defining our relationship to the mode of philosophical activity carried on within some alien cultural tradition has of course been noticed on occasion by anthropologists.”¹⁶ Here, the anthropological analogy serves to illustrate a somewhat negative claim and supports, willingly or not, historical relativism or even skepticism.¹⁷ In what follows, however, I recycle the analogy in a more affirmative mode. Rather than invoking the methodological tribulations of cultural anthropologists in order to lament the difficulties of reconstructing the “alien” intentions underlying historical utterances, I prefer turning to cultural anthropologists to see what methodological tools they have in fact developed in order perform the seemingly impossible task of decoding alien utterances; how, against all odds, they have in fact managed to grasp at least some of the things that Cameroonian pygmies “are up to,” as Clifford Geertz would put it.

4. Fieldwork in the History of Philosophy

Let me first anticipate an obvious objection. According to Bronislaw Malinowski’s original formulation, the proper conditions for ethnographic fieldwork “consist mainly in cutting oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible, which really can only be achieved by camping right in their villages.”¹⁸ In other words, the cultural anthropologist must make an active effort to immerse himself deeply in the culture he studies. An historian of philosophy, however, cannot aspire to such immersion, because the intellectual culture he studies no longer exists. Thus inescapably confined to the proverbial armchair, barred by time itself from that authentic world of the great cultural outdoors that the anthropologist prides himself in taking part in, the historian of philosophy has no use for hiking boots.

The dilemma is of course well known to “real” historians, i.e., those historians who write about the Thirty Years War, sixteenth-century trading routes, or the intricate politics of Cardinal Richelieu. They can never go back and verify whether the information they obtain from the texts handed over from the past provide an accurate account of that past, i.e., whether the sources provide reliable representations of the experienced, historical reality of warfare,

16. MacIntyre (1984), 34.

17. For a good example, incidentally appealing to Descartes’s travel metaphor, see Lepenies (1984), 146–47.

18. Malinowski (1922), 6.

trading, or politics. I am, however, unconvinced that this is an adequate description of the situation for the historian of philosophy whose relation to “historical reality” is different. The written material the historian of philosophy works on simply cannot be considered “sources to” historical reality in the sense that seventeenth-century documents on Richelieu’s premiership are considered sources to the political reality of early modern France. It is a trademark of intellectual cultures that they *happen* in writing, i.e., their being written is to a large extent how they *occur* and not just how they are *registered*. For the historian of philosophy, the texts he studies just *are* the historical reality under scrutiny, not a *representation* of it. In that respect, the work of the historian of philosophy is closer to that of an archaeologist excavating past monuments than to that of a “regular” historian studying historical sources: he works with texts as if they were ruins, vestiges, or monuments of philosophical meaning to be excavated, dusted off, and rebuilt.¹⁹

There is however an even better analogy available. In an insightful reflection on Wilhelm Dilthey, Lepenies evokes a certain family resemblance between the archival work of the historian of philosophy and the cultural anthropology’s work in the field:

Listening to Dilthey as he talks about the necessity to reconstruct the context and to retrace the development of philosophical systems not just from published books but from the philosophers’ original manuscripts, he resembles a field-worker more than an armchair-philologist. Dilthey’s history of philosophy is an anthropology carried out in the archive.²⁰

There is much truth to this account. Historically at least, the birth of modern historiography in mid-nineteenth-century Germany—beginning with Leopold Ranke—was characterized by an approach to archival work in many ways similar to anthropological fieldwork.²¹ But there is more than just historical truth to this when it comes to the history of philosophy, given its particular focus on *texts*. If, here putting to one side the question of participation, anthropological fieldwork essentially consists in prolonged immersion in the culture in question and the refusal to rely on non-native informants, then spending long periods of time reading the texts of Leibniz, Bayle, etc. just *is*

19. See Smith, this volume.

20. Lepenies (1984), 149–50.

21. See Eskildsen (2008), 430–33.

doing fieldwork in seventeenth-century intellectual culture. In fact, the historian of philosophy moves from the armchair to the great outdoors as easily as he shifts from reading a commentary to opening a volume containing his primary text.

Now, importantly, if the field of investigation is the past philosophical *texts* on the library shelves, then this also implies that *philosophers* are *not* the object under investigation. Let me linger a bit on that point by considering a fatally careless account of the intellectual historian's task by Richard Rorty. According to Rorty, the intellectual historian should proceed like the anthropologist "who wants to know how primitives talk to fellow-primitives as well as how they react to instructions from missionaries. For this purpose he tries to get inside their heads, to think in terms which he would never dream of employing at home."²² The passage is a good example of the ubiquity of the anthropological analogy in the methodological literature. The formulation is, however, unfortunate on several accounts. First, cultural anthropologists take no interest in the inside of people's heads. As Geertz writes: "The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informant. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyway. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to."²³ Next, for analogous reasons, historians of philosophy have no interest either in what the texts may tell him about the inside of past philosophers' heads.²⁴ On pains of violating the maxim that the historiography of philosophy aims at understanding the meaning of past philosophical texts, one cannot slide toward the standpoint that this meaning is reducible to the representation of original authorial intentions. The relation of representation is exactly the reverse. Studying the biography of an author, for example, helps the historian of philosophy reconstruct one representation among others of the philosophical text, i.e., namely, the particular understanding of the text that is the author's own. Now, there may still be good reasons for privileging the author's own representation/interpretation of his text. But there is no good reason for doing *more* than that and grant the author complete authority over it.²⁵

22. Rorty (1984), 50.

23. Geertz (1983), 58.

24. Ibid. 9–10. To be fair, Rorty gets it right when writing that "intellectual history consists of descriptions of what the intellectuals were up to at a given time, and of their interaction with the rest of society" (op. cit., 68; see also Rorty, Schneewind, Skinner (1984), 12).

25. See Hatfield (2005), 97; Skinner (1972), 405.

Cutting in this way the umbilical cord from textual meaning to authorial intention gives rise to concerns about how to situate philosophical texts in history. For, if it is not by reference to an author writing at a specific place at a specific time, how is a text qualified as “historical” to receive a meaning in any essential way related to some specific point in history justifying that qualification? If the historical meaning of Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, for example, cannot be reduced to what Spinoza had in mind when he wrote it, then what prevents the text from floating freely in history, the true historical meaning being whatever the text has meant at any given time in history, including today? In a certain way I believe philosophical texts do float in that way. The historian of philosophy should not necessarily focus narrowly on the time when a text was written, but can also focus on the subsequent history of the text, its transmission and reception. It seems reductive to think that the history of reception cannot *add* anything to the meaning of the text, but only either *repeat* or *misrepresent* the original meaning intended by the author. For example, when John Toland in the fourth and fifth *Letters to Serena* criticizes Spinoza for “having given no account of how matter comes to be mov’d” and having ignored that option that “motion is essential to matter,” it is no rare occurrence among commentators to simply interpret this as a clumsy misreading of Spinoza. Such interpretations, however, overlook the crucial fact that Toland’s text is a contribution to an early eighteenth-century debate between Toland, Leibniz, and Johann Georg Wachter. Hence, as Tristan Dagron has shown, even though Toland refers directly to Spinoza’s texts in the *Letters*, he is not so much discussing Spinoza as he is refuting Wachter’s interpretation of Spinoza in *Elucidarius Cabalisticus* in an attempt to show how his own brand of pantheism might prove as efficient a solution to certain constitutive problems with traditional Cartesian mechanism as Leibniz’s rehabilitation of substantial forms.²⁶ Spinoza himself, it seems, has simply spiraled out of the zone of contextual relevance for the simple reason that in the four decades that separate the publication of the *Opera posthuma* in 1677 and Toland’s *Letters* from 1704, the intellectual context for the discussion of Spinoza’s text has changed to such a degree that Spinoza arguably would not recognize himself in it at all. Hence, the Spinozism we encounter in the *Letters to Serena* is, as Pierre-François Moreau would put it, a “Spinozism without Spinoza.”²⁷ Nonetheless, we would still want to be able to say that Spinoza’s *texts* play an

26. See Dagron (2009), 167–259.

27. See Moreau (2007), 289–97.

important role in the constitution of this “Spinozism without Spinoza” and, conversely, that this “Spinozism without Spinoza” *in this context* contributes to the true historical meaning of Spinoza’s texts.

So how are we to proceed if we want to maintain that the history of reception can teach us something essential about the true historical meaning of a text, but without ending up completely uprooting the text from history as such? I believe that Skinner is right in stressing that past philosophical texts must be studied as concrete interventions in concrete historical debates that have been produced in response to other such interventions and that in turn will provoke the production of yet other interventions.²⁸ The meaning of a past philosophical text is in an essential way determined by the historical debate that the text is considered a contribution to by those who write or read it.²⁹ The interpretation of a past philosophical text, then, should take the form of a study of the relations that the text entertains with other philosophical or non-philosophical texts that contribute to the same historical debate as it does. Thus, in summary, what the historian of philosophy should be interested in is not so much isolated individual texts as it is texts insofar as they are precisely situated in larger *clusters of texts* all historically placed around a given *controversy*, be it local (e.g., the 1697 controversy in the *Journal des Sçavans* between Leibniz and Régis on the relations between Descartes and Spinoza) or more global (e.g., the controversies on *jus circa sacra* in Holland from Grotius to Spinoza). Determining the meaning of some text is then nothing but determining the role the text plays as a concrete intervention in some historical debate and situating the text in a complex network of intellectual positions actually in play at the time.

A single text may be an element in a multitude of such clusters. It is up to the historian of philosophy interested in the past philosophical text to pick the controversy he will study and to identify the exact cluster of texts he will pitch his tent next to. Exactly how such clusters are to be circumscribed is, I suspect, a somewhat pragmatic process involving some initial provisional determination of the field, followed by interrogations put to the intellectual agents within that field about the exactitude of the initial circumscription. In any case, I would resist providing a priori conceptual principles for the circumscription of such clusters, because this would be yielding to the temptation of proposing yet another rudimentary philosophy of history. What is, however, more important at present is to realize that while the initial determination of

28. Skinner (1969), 45–46.

29. *Ibid.*, 37.

a given cluster may have, indeed should have, something empirical, pragmatic, or even intuitive to it, it is still the case—as I argue in the following section—that once a cluster *is* determined, the restrictions upon what will count as historically true interpretation of the texts taking part in it is given by exact principles that have nothing empirical, pragmatic, or intuitive about them.

Hence, to summarize, the relevant intellectual context for establishing the true historical meaning of a given past philosophical text is circumscribed by the totality of other texts contributing to the historically determined controversy to which the text in question is also a contribution, the “controversy” being here defined as a given cluster of texts that historically “gathers” around the text in question and that, as it were, constitute a historical commentary on that text. This determination will be important since it allows for a principled distinction between interpretive perspectives on a given text that are contextually internal or external, and thus provides a criterion for what I in the following will term *historical immanence*.

5. *Historical Perspectivism*

It is a truism among contextually inclined historians of philosophy that the philosophies of dead philosophers should be reconstructed “on their own terms,” meaning by this that we are bound to misrepresent their views if we employ the conceptual categories of contemporary philosophy as an interpretive grid for reading their texts. Gary Hatfield, for example, while expounding the merits of his “historically oriented philosophical methodology,” invokes the importance of “taking past texts seriously on their own terms, seeking to understand the problems and projects of past philosophy as they were, instead of only seeking a reading that solves a current philosophical problem.”³⁰ The view is often associated with the fundamental rule of historical reconstruction stated by Skinner, namely, that “no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never have been brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done.”³¹ Hence Rorty explains that “when we respect Skinner’s maxim we shall give an account of the dead thinker ‘in his own terms,’ ignoring the fact that we should think ill of anyone who still used those terms today.”³² I have some misgivings about

30. Hatfield (2005), 91, 97.

31. Skinner (1969), 28.

32. Rorty (1984), 54.

Skinner's formula that I return to later, but I remain sympathetic to its main point, which is to stress that "the perpetual danger, in our attempts to enlarge our historical understanding, is... that our expectation about what someone must be saying or doing will themselves determine that we understand the agent to be doing something he would not—or even could not—himself have accepted as an account of what he *was* doing."³³

This said, it is far from clear exactly how we are to go about doing what Skinner recommends us to do, i.e., how we shall manage to determine in a precise fashion and according to certain principles what some agent could possibly have accepted as a correct description of what he meant. In fact, browsing through the methodological texts propounding this or similar views, I have been struck by the fact that most of them are surprisingly unhelpful on the matter, but generally just seem to invoke, explicitly or implicitly, some kind of sensitivity to the wording of the texts and to the general contextual framework, both intellectual and non-intellectual.³⁴ We are also presented with a host of good examples that convincingly illustrate how such sensitivity comes in handy when reading the texts. An example, however, is no demonstration and will not tell us how to acquire the requisite historical sensitivity, what exactly it consists in, and how it translates into concrete methodological rules to follow in the interpretation of past philosophical texts.

Let us take yet another educational visit to the department of cultural anthropology. When justifying his contextualist rule, Skinner denounces a "conceptual parochialism," where an observer "may unconsciously misuse his vantage-point in describing the *sense* of a given work" and "the danger ... that the historian may conceptualize an argument in such a way that its alien elements are dissolved into an apparent but misleading familiarity."³⁵ There is nothing coincidental about Skinner's appeal to the anthropological dichotomy of the "alien" and the "familiar" in this formulation. That the historian of philosophy must account for a past philosophy "on its own terms" conveys essentially the same intuition as that of an anti-ethnocentric cultural anthropologist committed to depicting a primitive society without evaluating it according to criteria belonging to his own worldview. In this context, anthropologists are particularly aware of the epistemological disaster lurking behind the appeal to some unspecified cultural *Einfühlung* such as Malinowski's

33. Skinner (1969), 6.

34. For a strong version of this approach, see Goldenbaum, this volume.

35. *Ibid.*, 27.

claims that he “acquired ‘the feeling’ for native good and bad manners” or “began to feel that [he] was indeed in touch with the natives.”³⁶ Indeed, after the publication of Malinowski’s *Diary in the Strict Sense of Term* in 1967, brutally extinguishing whatever romanticism was still left in the discipline, much methodological work in cultural anthropology has consisted in searching for a more trustworthy replacement for their forefather’s now tainted cultural sensitivity.³⁷ They realized that they could not do without a clear, meta-epistemological criterion allowing determining whether or not they had “accessed” a native mind-set, grounded in a concept of what such access even *means*.

Now, this criterion is not easily satisfied, but very easily formulated. As Malinowski already put it himself, it is “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world.”³⁸ Franz Boas also formulated it when writing in 1943 that “if it is our serious purpose to understand the thoughts of a people, the whole analysis of experience must be based on their concepts, not ours.”³⁹ The notion that one should thus describe “from the native’s point of view,” later transformed by Geertz into a kind of catchphrase,⁴⁰ corresponds to a requirement of *cultural immanence* of correct anthropological interpretation. The anthropologists’ attempts to develop the adequate tools for such culturally immanent interpretation have been prominently displayed in the 1970s for example in the discussions concerning so-called *emic* analysis (as opposed to *etic*). Hence, the “emicists” insisted on describing cultures according to distinctions formulated within that culture itself and undertook, on the basis of a model originally conceived by linguists, the construction of a “method of finding where something makes a difference for one’s informants,” as Ward H. Goodenough put it in his *Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology* from 1970.⁴¹

This brief visit to the anthropology department equips us with an additional insight about what it *means* to account for some past philosophy “on

36. Malinowski (1922), 8.

37. See Geertz (1983), 56.

38. Malinowski (1922), 25.

39. Boas (1943), 314.

40. Cf. Geertz (1974), reprinted in Geertz (1983), 55–70.

41. Goodenough (1970), cit. in Olivier de Sardan (1998), 155. The distinction between “emic” and “etic” is derived from the linguistic distinction between phonetic and phonemic differences, i.e., between acoustic differences considered significant independently from the language user and acoustic differences perceived as significant by the language user. Transferring the distinction to cultural analysis was first proposed in Pike (1954). The distinction emic/etic was intensely debated throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

its own terms”—an insight that is not captured well at all by the habitual reference to Skinner’s rule. This insight is that we are fundamentally dealing with a *perspectivist* requirement. Developing the meaning of some philosophy “on its own terms” simply *means* taking departure from an *internal perspective*. The requirement of understanding past philosophies “on their own terms,” or what we can call the requirement of *historically immanent reconstruction*, implies then that the parameters and guiding principles of the reconstruction must have been formulated from *a perspective situated within the historical context* of these past philosophies.

Importantly, the formulation here determines interpretive perspective as “internal” or “external” in terms of a specified *context* rather than the *text itself* or a *text corpus* associated with the *author*. In contrast, another much narrower formulation of interpretive immanence would be to maintain that “internal perspective” and “immanence” should refer *exclusively* to the author’s authority over his own text, so that only interpretations developed by the author himself, or which follow principles of interpretation explicitly indicated by the author himself, will eventually count as interpretations having a genuine claim on the true meaning of the text. This is the approach taken by Martial Gueroult when he writes that “the study of a philosophical enterprise ... must, when it has at its disposal documents that allows for it, take its point of departure in the methodological teaching of the author.”⁴² Gueroult narrows down the range of legitimate interpretive perspectives to include only perspectives expressed in texts belonging to the text corpus of the *author*. This is indeed the fundamental axiom of his “structuralist” method. As has been noted often enough, however, the approach is fatally insensitive to the relation between historical context and meaning. Gueroult’s method is incapable, for example, of accommodating the intuition that Lambert Van Velthuysen’s elaborate reading of Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in a letter to Jacob Ostens from 1671 has some claim on the historical truth about what Spinoza’s treatise *actually meant*, simply because Velthuysen was a liberal Dutch philosopher who wrote his assessment within a year of the publication of the *Tractatus*. If we are to respect this intuition, close contexts must be included into the sphere of interpretive immanence.

In order, however, to provide a more principled and less intuitive formulation of the point and get a better grasp of how exactly to set up the boundaries of contextual immanence, we should return to the notion that a past philosophical text is a concrete intervention or contribution to a determined past philosophical controversy. From this, one may conclude that the relevant

42. Gueroult (1962), 172–84.

context for the determination of the true historical meaning of a text is limited to the set of texts that are actual contributions to that same controversy. Hence, the criterion of contextual immanence is something one can term *contextual agency*, which, in short, may be formulated as the idea that only those who contribute to the controversy have a word to say in the interpretation of the true meaning of the text or texts that the controversy is about. Moreover, the determination of a given perspective as contextually internal or external turns on the determination of the debate or controversy to which the text was considered a contribution by those involved in the controversy, whether that be the author or some other participant in the controversy (as already seen, in some cases, the author may even *not* have any such contextual agency—it was the case in relation to Toland's refutation of Wachter's Spinoza-reading, the latter being a "Spinozism without Spinoza.")

The importance of the study of controversies for the determination of contextual agency has been intuitively grasped in recent scholarship insisting on the study of close intellectual contexts. Jonathan Israel, for example, has recently stressed the importance of controversies in intellectual history in his *Enlightenment Contested*.⁴³ Skinner has also come a long way in formulating historical principles of this kind. It is however necessary to signal a significant difference between historical perspectivism and Skinner's brand of contextualism. As we have seen, according to Skinner, the historical plausibility of a given interpretation of a past philosophical text hinges on the acceptability of that text for the author, i.e., whether the interpretation states the meaning of the text in terms that would be recognizable for the author. One must thus avoid "crediting a writer with a meaning he could not have intended to convey, since that meaning was not available to him."⁴⁴ Contrary to what Skinner suggests, however, acceptability for the author cannot to my mind count as the sole criterion for inclusion of a given interpretation into the constitution of the true historical meaning of a text. Rather, it is the acceptance (or actual statement) of an interpretation in the relevant historical context that warrants such inclusion. For example, republican reinterpretations of Hobbes written in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, such as those by Pieter de la Court and Lucius Antistius Constans, have their share in the true historical meaning of *De Cive* in the second half of the seventeenth century regardless of whether Hobbes was inclined to republicanism or not. In this

43. See Israel (2006), 23–25.

44. Skinner (1969), 9; cf. Skinner (1972), 393–408, esp. 406.

case, inclusion into the range of contextual immanence is warranted by the fact that these interpretations contribute to the same controversy about the conditions and limits of Sovereignty prompted by Hobbes's political texts in seventeenth-century Holland. Whether a given interpretation of past philosophical text should be included as a part of the authentic meaning of that text thus is no way hinges on the acceptability of the interpretation from the point of view of the author, i.e., of whether this would be an interpretation that Hobbes could possibly have endorsed, but exclusively on how the relevant historical controversy has been circumscribed.

Granting methodological privilege to contextually internal perspectives turns on the conviction that essential information about the true meaning of some past philosopher's text can be obtained by interrogating the interlocutors of that past philosopher. There is, however, more to historical perspectivism than an intuition about what one should understand by gaining access to the true historical meaning of a text. What is at play concerns the very definition and constitution of such true historical meaning, and is thus closely related to the third requirement for an unapologetic historiography of philosophy described earlier in section 2. Hence, according to historical perspectivism, any reading of a past philosophical text that is not contextually internal cannot, because of this very fact and regardless of its content, lay any claim on the true historical meaning of that past philosophical text. Any interpretation making claims about true historical meaning *must* be either explicitly grounded in some actually deployed internal perspective or be shown to have a direct equivalent in some such perspective. Indeed, the true historical meaning of a past philosophical text should be defined as *the sum of actual historically immanent or contextually internal perspectives on that past philosophical text*. On this definition, the complete historical truth about some utterance or set of utterances under investigation—a philosophical statement, passage, book, work—may defined as the sum of accounts, i.e., perspectives or interpretations, actually developed by the totality of agents moving within the contextual field constituted around that utterance or utterances. To state the principle somewhat crudely, the "objective" or "complete" account just is the sum of subjective accounts given by the agents within that field.

6. Historical Actualism

I have argued that the true historical meaning of a past philosophical text must be understood in terms of the contextually internal interpretations of that text. Now, this could seem to simply reiterate a widespread contextualist insight.

For example, fifteen years ago, in the introduction to their *Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers present this *opus Herculeum* among edited volumes on Early Modern Philosophy as conveying “one way, at any rate, in which an educated European of the seventeenth century might have organized the domain of philosophy.”⁴⁵ This reflects an ambition that corresponds to the requirement of contextual immanence. Nonetheless, to my mind, Garber and Ayers’s formulation remains problematic because it fails to address the question of *which* educated European’s perspective they adopt. The internal perspective from which they aim at contemplating the terrain is that of some unspecified, generic seventeenth-century intellectual, whose equally generic level of information and sensitivity are then taken as a parameter for understanding the actual structure of the intellectual landscape under scrutiny. The problem, of course, is that no such generic intellectual ever existed, and that the very construction of such an abstract figure inevitably imports quite a bit of externality into a vantage point the main virtue of which was exactly to be internal. Moreover, it is epistemologically problematic to think that an actual and concrete historical meaning should have its unique source in a perspective that is non-actual and abstract. For this reason, historical perspectivism requires that the internal perspective adopted be *identifiable*, *specific*, and *actual*. In short, one must know *whose* perspective one assumes, i.e., be able to put a *name* on it (and, in some cases, even a *date*). This requirement is what I formulate in terms of a commitment to *historical actualism*.

I here finally arrive at the role that historical perspectivism reserves for past *philosophers*, i.e., the role that one should assign to past authors and readers in the constitution of the true historical meaning of past philosophical texts. They provide subjective perspectives, and these perspectives taken together make up the complex true historical meaning about the text. These actual and concrete subjective perspectives of various intellectuals cannot and should not be reduced to a generic but non-actual and abstract “seventeenth-century philosopher” of the kind evoked by Ayers and Garber. Indeed, I believe the true historical meaning of past philosophical texts is irreducibly “thick,” as it were, i.e., constituted by a multitude of perspectives that in the vast majority of cases do *not* converge toward a single unified interpretation. It comprises interpretations that are sometimes contradictory and incompatible, but also sometimes converging and mutually supportive. Moreover, it is constituted by historical meanings the truth of which does not reach further than the

45. Garber and Ayers (1998), 4; Garber (2001), 236–38.

specific controversy to which the text is considered a contribution, i.e., it is constituted only internally among contextual agents and has no direct truth value outside this specific sphere of contextual agency. It would not occur to an anthropologist to ask whether the true meaning of, say, the belief system of the tribe of pygmies he describes is the true meaning of that belief system for anyone else than those pygmies. Similarly, for the historian of philosophy, the true historical meaning of, say, Malebranche's doctrine of vision in God in the controversy between Arnauld, Malebranche, and Leibniz is nothing but the sum of perspectives on the doctrine of vision in God actually developed by Arnauld, Malebranche, and Leibniz.

When studying a past historical text, then, one must first identify the historical debates to which the text under scrutiny contributes in order to determine the range of the historically immanent context. Next, one must pick out from within this context one or several internal perspectives on the text and reconstruct the interpretations deployed from this or these specific perspectives, each of them representing their part or aspect of the full historical meaning about the text. The historian himself here has a role to play in the choice of internal perspectives that he will privilege, since clearly, in most cases, he will not be able to reconstruct all perspectives actually deployed and, in some cases, must even limit his account to *one* such perspective, thus narrowing his ambition down to reconstructing only one aspect or specific part of the historical truth about a past philosophical text or cluster of texts.

For the historian of philosophy, thus picking out a specific internal perspective resembles in important respects the anthropologist's field practice of picking out a "key informant." Understandably—and I apologize in advance to the anthropologists for the caricature—a cultural anthropologist messing about in some village trying to figure out what the natives are up to would rather have as his key informant the local witch doctor than the village idiot, regardless of the many and varied practical and theoretical problems that may also arise from taking this approach.⁴⁶ The choice of key informants follows fairly pragmatic criteria relating to the role of the candidate in the community, his knowledge, willingness, and ability to communicate. Similarly, the historian of philosophy working on Descartes's texts might want to privilege the sophisticated and methodologically thought-out perspectives on the Cartesian philosophy worked out by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz or Pierre-Daniel Huet rather than go ask, say, Jean-Baptiste Morin about his thoughts on the topic. This, of

46. See Tremblay (1991), 98–106.

course, does not mean that Morin does not have his say in the constitution of the true historical meaning of Descartes's texts, or that studying Morin's texts may not yield interesting results. Morin is representative of a broadly accepted position among minor seventeenth-century philosophers. So whereas studying Descartes from Morin's perspective may not get us very deep into Descartes's text, the "Morin perspective" still has some claim on the true historical meaning of Descartes's work in that his interpretation resonates with a multitude of other "minor" interpretations in the period. Moreover, studying Morin's perspective can help the historian of philosophy in establishing a sort of contextual baseline for the study of the other more interesting and comprehensive stories about Descartes's philosophical texts he is likely to get out of Leibniz or Huet. Picking out informants and ranking them, however, does remain largely dependent on what aspect of the true historical meaning one is looking for. Working out the details of such qualitative "ranking" of internal perspectives in terms of their importance and weight is a complex matter and cannot be worked out within the scope of this paper. In this context, I simply wanted to point to *the necessity of picking one*, and of picking one that is both *identifiable* (i.e., associated with a name) and *actual* (i.e., actually deployed).

The requirement that the internal perspectives adopted be both identifiable and actual leads me finally to formulate an important difference to Skinner's brand of contextualist history, namely, that it is committed to *historical actualism*. If we look closely at Skinner's rule—i.e., that we should never attribute to an author something which he could never have been brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done—it is clear that the hypothetical "could have" formally allows for the inclusion within the scope of historical interpretation of past utterances meanings that were in fact never actually put forward, neither by the author himself nor by intellectual interlocutors in the immediate context. Skinner's approach thus leaves the domain of historical truth wide open to a broad field of acceptable but essentially hypothetical interpretations. Thus, according to Skinner:

... the appropriate methodology for the history of ideas must be concerned, first of all, *to delineate the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance of a given utterance*, and, next, to trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider *linguistic* context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer.⁴⁷

47. Skinner (1969), 48; my italics; cf. Skinner (1972), 406.

I find the italicized bit of this passage very problematic. First, clearly, one cannot convincingly include all historically acceptable but merely hypothetical interpretations in the constitution of true historical meaning. No hypothetical claim about the past can be formally included in the notion of what was actually the case, which arguably is the sole object of historical study. In that respect, I accept Leopold Ranke's famous conception of historical truth in *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker* from 1824 as the reconstruction of "how it actually [*eigentlich*] was." Skinner does, of course, also acknowledge this when insisting on eventually "decoding the *actual* intention of the writer." But I fail to see how, in principle, his method can achieve this. By "delineating the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed" we exclude a number of contextually or historically *impossible* interpretations, e.g., that Marsilius of Padua meant to contribute to a discussion about the separation of powers in *Defensor pacis*.⁴⁸ Certainly, it is an important step toward historically correct interpretations to have determined which interpretations *can* be true. But from there on, we are left with very little in terms of help in picking out the interpretation corresponding to the *actual* intention among the remaining possible, i.e., acceptable, interpretations. And I simply do not see how "tracing the relations to a wider linguistic context" will ever help us in achieving this task, exactly because doing so only amounts to placing the utterance within a general framework of (linguistically) possible significations, without in any way narrowing down the available possible options to a particular, actual one. In principle, then, Skinner's method abandons true historical meaning to the hypothetical space delineated by the reference to what the "author could have been brought to accept." However, the domain of meaning occupied by "true historical meaning" is not and cannot be a logical or hypothetical one. It is by definition actual (otherwise it would not be "historical"). We thus require a firmer procedure allowing us to move from the hypothetical space of the merely acceptable to that which was indeed accepted.

For this reason, the definition of true historical meaning of texts that I have provided earlier does not leave room for any such *merely possible* perspectives, i.e., it does not include perspectives on those texts that *could have* been internally formulated but which were in fact *not* formulated. This puts some important restrictions on what can count as a legitimate interpretation in the history of philosophy and rules out a series of hypothetical methodological procedures that otherwise present themselves as a temptation. One can, in

48. See Skinner (1969), 8.