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# Freshest Advices on What To Do With the Historical Method in Philosophy When Using It to Study a Little Bit of Philosophy That Has Been Lost to History

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## Citation Details

Gilbert, Bennett (2012) "Freshest Advices on What To Do With the Historical Method in Philosophy When Using It to Study a Little Bit of Philosophy That Has Been Lost to History," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 7.

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# Freshest Advices on What To Do With the Historical Method in Philosophy When Using It to Study a Little Bit of Philosophy That Has Been Lost to History

**Bennett Gilbert, Reed College**

Published online: 30 January 2012

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## Abstract

The paper explores the question of the relationship between the practice of original philosophical inquiry and the study of the history of philosophy. It is written from my point of view as someone starting a research project in the history of philosophy that calls this issue into question, in order to review my starting positions. I argue: first, that any philosopher is sufficiently embedded in culture that her practice is necessarily historical; second, that original work is in fact in part a reconstruction by reinterpretation of the past and that therefore it bears some relation to historiographic techniques for the restoration of damaged objects and texts; and third that the special oddities of the relations of present and past do not fail to ensnare the philosopher, who must restore the past but freely break from it. I describe this relationship as proleptic. Finally, I argue that this is a moral imperative in writing philosophy, derived from the imperative to be honest.

The historical method in philosophy is the study of the history of philosophy as a means of thinking about philosophical issues for the sake of the practice of original philosophical work. Formerly it was widely thought that the historical method was indispensable to the practice of philosophy. Those opposed to this view, whom I'll call "presentists"<sup>1</sup> in this paper, hold that, whatever notions the historical method and original philosophical work might have in common as rational rigorous and honest inquiries, the subject matter of the two studies is at heart different, on various accounts, and therefore that the history of philosophy is of little benefit, if not positively harmful, to the practice of philosophical inquiry. Those whom I'll here call the "traditionalist" view the historical method as indispensable, claiming that philosophical practice that does not include the history of philosophy and its problems misses some things (variously described by various writers) that are of the essence in philosophy. I shall not here directly evaluate

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these claims as to the critique one makes of the other. My attitude is irenic. I see only harm in arguing that any method is essential to the practice of philosophy in any sense such that work done without it is to be disparaged or dismissed on this sole ground or by any clever reasoning from this ground directly for the exclusion of work made by other methods of philosophical inquiry. Since varying methods are actually practiced within the domain of philosophy, we must say that features of philosophy present in any practice are understood in an indispensable way by use of the historical method and can be lost to our awareness, with loss to civilization, if the historical method is rejected. Varying methods being compatible, no one method can consistently dispense with the historical method. It is my conviction that just this much of a claim in favor of the historical method is true, and to convince you of this I shall presently make clearer what I take the historical method in philosophy to be and to do and how it ought to be applied. The kind of historical method I most esteem in this regard, and my reasons for its worth, are, however, not based on a traditionalist approach to historiography.

In the next week after this writing, I will begin a long research project on a very tiny shard from the history of philosophy. Actually, I began this project some months ago—first, by finding and specifying the subject and then by a chosen range of preparatory reading. But now I begin the close reading and the lucid writing, so hard to fight for, in which I intend to use a species of the historical method, devised according to my accumulated thoughts on the matter. I am to confront some or all of the ideas about methods in history and in philosophy, and their connections, that I have hitherto convinced myself of, and to take these as far as I can into a topic from which they did not arise and in which they will be applied to occasions of facts, logic, and communication far more fastidious and final than those they meet merely within my own deliberations. No matter what I want to believe, I cannot scorn any actuality. This essay is an initial methodological memoir to myself, not so much because I might forget my own instructions to myself—though I certainly have done so once research is underway—but also because I'll be thankful to figure out, if I can, what is wrong and what is right in my method of inquiry. But there is another reason for putting this to paper. At the moment of this writing I am in some ways clearer as to my beliefs, or let us say more innocent as to actualities, than I ever again will be, both in the life of this research project and henceforward altogether as a conscientious thinker and writer. Every project of research or thought that I have done so far has been such a one-way transit into more confusion or more clarity or both. The present project will be no different in this regard. Therefore this is a good opportunity to sum up what I think I know about the historical method in philosophy. Because these words are vulnerable to undoing at any and all points from the very next steps to the last surprise in the plot, I had ought to be rather firm in surveying my starting position both for my perusal and before the scrutiny of others. I, being in transit, must speak confidently of my notions and at the same time must abandon portions of my confidence for the sake of an honest start. This is, I think, a conflict common to most uses of the historical method in philosophy. The conflict sometimes makes for an

impossibility, or rather a queered possibility; but what I must account for is that possibility above this impossibility which philosophizing historically gives us.

The alternation of claim and doubt is at the front line of historical work. One of the first and most basic question one asks oneself at the beginning of address to an historical project is, putting the matter very broadly, to what extent do I regard the thoughts and deeds of those who lived in earlier times to be the sort of thing I can come near to understanding? Or to what extent do I regard them as another sort of thing from the conscious life that my contemporaries and I know? At the present point in history our view of the commonalities of human life across time is blessed with great richness and great doubts, which each of us mixes in some way that we must bring to consciousness and justify in thinking about virtually everything including history. The consequences of Thomas Kuhn's ideas of translation from the thought of one era into the thought of another have greatly darkened this picture, whether he intended this or not, along with the work of a great many historians in whose points of view the idols of our philosophers were scattered amidst a thick jungle of monuments on the plane of time. The past is both near and far. Michel de Certeau's phrase, that history is "a transparent caesura," helps neatly to sum this up. Obstacles of an invisible or a mental nature break into one's sighting historical time.

If objects from the past we have right before our eyes are difficult to understand, events from the past are as a general rule yet more difficult to figure out. Even the thoughts of other persons trouble confidence in our own comprehension from the second they are uttered. My research project concerns a text that is lost. We must be certain that it existed but do not know if it was ever written down in any large measure or was always an oral text of which we have a few reminiscences. This text, if it exists anywhere in writing, is hidden behind those opaque obstacles representing historical time itself—sand and dirt and rubble. Wherever any fragment of it might now be, we cannot see it. Therefore this task of research is to reconstruct, or to restore, the thoughts of the philosopher, rather than the words, in connection with some view of the known thoughts of that philosopher and others in position to enlighten us on the matter. In this project the motions of knowing and of not knowing, of postulating and discarding, of claiming and doubting, of theory and fact that are basic to memory and to the study of historical time—this generation of alternation—are magnified by the unchanging presence of the thoughts under study in so minimal a quantity of words as to be as much absence as presence. One result of the magnified view is that from the beginning to the end of such a project one's sense that the results are bits of news from the front of inquiry, rather than conclusions, draws upon the curiosity or wonder or profound demand that spark inquiry where something fresh is to be explored. In so far as historical time is the object of restoration or reconstruction it is something new one advances into, just as are non-historical researches. The concept of discovery as an experience the inquirer lives through at her own front line of advance is at least one thing both the historian of philosophy and the philosopher have in common.

This argues that they have deep motives, profoundly rooted in their lives, for this peculiar work. Also, then, the difficulties and joys of finding new knowledge and new understanding out of our difficult material is common to the two the modes of philosophical activity—“doing philosophy” and “doing the history of philosophy,” as someone once awkwardly but accurately phrased it—that have come into opposition. I venture to say that the presence or absence of texts to which philosophical thought is trained to respond is not a crisis-inducing defeater of the claim that both modes are fundamental and necessary to inquiry into philosophical questions.

I have so far claimed that both history of philosophy studies and original philosophical work have two things in common by virtue of being human rational discourses. These are the difficulties of communication and the situation of being in the front line of acquiring new learning. My claim is sufficiently harmless that no fluster need arise in the dovecote. One of the difficulties of communication is however more provocative—the one I have specified at some little length, that of communication, if we can call it that, between those of the present age and those of past times. It is the claim of a number of philosophers that this sort of communication need not trouble those doing original work in philosophy. But all original work requires standings and holdings as to some parts of the work done by others in fields, varying or similar, during historical time. As I have pointed out, textual exegesis is not the only sort of commitment to the ideas of others that is qualified to be in relation to historical time. Nor can any discredit of the authority of earlier thought, either as to truth-value or as to use-value, make diachrony disappear. If anyone claims that we are to think that older thought has been superceded and can appear only as witchcraft and wizardry where we want science and reason, that person’s claim includes a construal of thoughts (or words or events) from historical time in an intelligible form that has advanced in verity beyond any such construal made in historical time by comprehensive reflection. This construal is indefeasible if any such claim is to be made.

On almost any understanding of historical thought, the goal is to fit what we don’t yet know, what we shall presently learn, and that which we can but guess at into an intelligibility more comprehensive (or higher, if you will) than that we have from any or all of these sources. To use de Certeau’s notion of the “transparent caesura,” though the energetic motion has ceased to be intelligible to some faculties of our understanding it continues to be understandable by us, so that by some faculty historical thought and practice attempt to link the bare facts that peak on either side of the gap. This work can, of course, reveal divisions as well as commonalities in the lives of those persons and communities which any historian studies. Thus, every project of historical research involves something like reconstruction or restoration of what has been lost or become unclear. This is not to say that what is studied was ever stable in its own day or subject to finished and perfected understanding at any time, past present or future. A specific model of what I have in mind is the textual lacuna: a missing piece of any bit amidst extant bits of text, prior or following or both. Of course, the lacuna is too simple a model to explain

very much of what historians of philosophy, much less any historians, do, not least because of the complexity of the thought needed to guess at the briefest textual lacunae.

However, the notion of the lacuna does direct our attention to something that seems rarely to be considered in discussion by philosophers of the uses they have for history. Every critical employment of historical research includes intellectual acts of reconstruction and of restoration. I use these two words to refer to different though related things, and I'll consider "reconstruction" first. Whenever we make a statement about anything in historical time we are reconstructing what is otherwise in some measure of disarray in our minds. If this were not the case, such statement would not be about "historical" time. Philosophers who discuss ideas and movements in historical time are reconstructing them, by using their critical skills, to make sense of the bits or swathes of philosophical history of interest to them, even when these are extensively documented. Along with all the theories in the world about contingency and necessity in history, there are just three basic methods of historiographic reconstruction from given materials: first, one can work in narrow focus to eliminate everything less likely in order to build up what is most likely to be the case at the situation under investigation; second, one can work from the mass of facts in the large context of the period and all the later opinions as to the period in which the matter was situated in order to come to a sense of the case; or third one can induct in a backward direction from the present day, in order to fix what was the case by its factual consequences. These types of reconstruction proceed by way of what is unlikely, by way of what is likely, and by way of what is induced.

The practice of original philosophy necessarily involves reconstruction in at least two ways. First, when it is based on advancing understanding of prior thought—supposing for the moment that is not always but only sometimes the case—it maintains a reconstruction of some diachronic movements in thought in some structural relations to one another. This is, as it were, its idiom: historical time as its idiomatic region. Second, original philosophical practice seeks its own necessity. The philosopher finds the way of thinking she suggests, or the solutions to problems she pursues, to be at least not less reasonable than any other solution or point of view. The similarities of philosophical reasoning to the repair of lacunae is clear enough, being derived from the tendency of thought itself to reflect upon past thought and to proceed by, or toward, self-reflective reason. If this is the case, philosophers ought to consider their methods of reconstruction of philosophy in historical time. However unwillingly or partially they are involved with the history of philosophy, women and men doing original work exercise one or more of the methods I have mentioned in proceeding toward better solutions to philosophical issues. Philosophers work on or within a gigantic net of lacunae left both by their predecessors and by their contemporaries in every field. However irrelevant a philosopher considers the history of philosophy, she is acting not only upon her view of this history but also upon some definite method of reconstructing that history so as to arrive at her point of view.

If she doubts the value of historical study in philosophy claimed by the traditionalist, she would at this point respond that she, having studied the history of philosophy, has concluded that this body of thought is in the end archaic by virtue of being verifiably erroneous, or superseded, or misconceived, such that it is of negligible use in her original work as a philosopher. She might add, to the agreement of many, that an intelligible account of the history of philosophy means that either it must be understood mainly to be wrong, or not to be a thoroughly intelligible account, quite without respect to how much it has or has not been part of the body of knowledge she now commits herself to increasing or whether much her historical studies have influenced her manner of practicing philosophy. The task of rational inquirers who do not wish to be historians, she might say, is to reconstruct nothing but rather to construct something truthful and beneficial; and although historical scholarship seeks truth and benefits us as well, the object of its study is different from that of the inquiry into the nature and advancement of current knowledge. One can sweeten this position in various ways, but the core of it must be tough if it is to be a position at all: that original work in philosophy is of a nature such that it gains little from a knowledge of the history of philosophical ideas entailing no authority, because the study of error is insufficient to the discovery of truth. My query about the methodology of reconstruction of historical time up to this point has served, agreeably or not, to do little but sharpen the contradictions between presentists and traditionalists. It does in fact do more than this, but certainly the analogy to lacunae fails to fit what creative philosophical research is beyond a certain point. To extend the reach of my idea, consider the second of the historiographic actions mention above, restoration.

One may take the word broadly, as a near-synonym to reconstruction, just as reconstruction can signify in areas other than the historiographic, but the use of the word to describe a craft of reconstruction helps to focus on whether and how one uses past philosophy as authority. Restoration is a specific type of historical reconstruction, which one readily pictures for the present purposes by using our common notions of what the restorer of a painting does to paintings in need of restoration, and of what the restorer of furniture does to cabinetry in need of restoration, and of what the restorer of bindings does to bindings in need of restoration. Restoration involves physical labor for both the aesthetic and structural goals we propose in doing restoration. The restorer must think about both artistic matters, including the history of art and theories of beauty, and very practical matters such as chemistry and geometry. Like all reconstruction of things from historical time (including events, facts, narratives, texts, and objects), the restorer works according to theories of restoration, and his or her work shows the effects of the chosen approach.

In the restoration of objects there is theory. The first rule is, like the physician's, to do no harm. The restorer also wants to prevent future harm, if she can. But as to what state an object ought to be returned by restoration the cardinal rule offers no guidance, for if some

change the object underwent is removed in favor of an earlier state one may argue that, something of the actual history object—something of both material and social import—having been lost, the restorer has harmed the object. A similar problem arises when a successor regime renames city streets, or cities themselves, to return to a more ancient name, undoing the evidence of a later, often revolutionary, ideological program, however hated, loses something from historical time. It might be pleasant to forget bad things, but it might also be very unwise to do so no matter how sweet the triumph over them by a political restoration. In these antinomies no course of action is altogether satisfying. Any change to what presently exists may deceive as to the truth of what has existed. Any policy of restoration is guided by a theory of what is better, and not merely by the maxim of prudence; and all such theories represent a critical and philosophical point of view chained to the complications of the actual accretions in historical time onto the object of work. The “perfect” state is under the control of the interpreter and not that of the object. Even the first state of an object, fresh from a creator’s hands, may be flawed either as to the creator’s own intention or as to the historical circumstances that the object must be taken to represent in order for us to understand it. If it is flawed in the later way, clearly we must amend our understanding of the day or epoch in question by means of the evidence the object gives us. But that evidence of course is retrievable only by scraping away the rust of time. The right or best way to do this is governed by the theories that govern works of restoration. Ideas match these requirements we make of our handling of specimens and artifacts. Even completely “idealized” restorations express large philosophical commitments that are arrived at through the various ways we try to answer ultimate questions—including by thinking them through from within the context of objects.

It appears at first that the history of philosophy has no such tangible objects as the restorer has. In one sense this is true but in other senses quite false. Texts are objects of active thought. The restorer of a Renaissance painting is not supposed to lighten a darkened spot by applying a blob of orange paint with a three-inch brush, nor is the furniture restorer supposed to take a balpeen hammer to the work of the *eboniste*. Historians in general are guided by the prudential maxims of the restorer. The historian is not supposed to violate facts by her reading of the history of philosophy. But the philosopher doing original work also has a theory of restoration. To the thought of the past she is permitted to blob on orange paint with a three-inch brush or take wide swings with a balpeen hammer. She too has a theory of restoration. Though the object is materially different, it is still the object of the philosopher, both because philosophers are necessarily engaged with the historical past of philosophy for the reasons I have mentioned, but also because the philosopher thinks about all the theories by which we strive to make the world around us intelligible. A philosopher’s judgment about ideas is an interpretation, implicit or explicit, of the historical past of philosophy. Let her interpretations be as wild as may be in the historian’s view: no matter, for misunderstanding are our stock-in-trade. Instead of “do” no harm to their own history,



philosophers raise hell with it. Raise hell, but do it accurately. Yet the standard of accuracy—its meaning and content—is the philosopher's subject, it is her own work, and it is hers to call. But call it we must.

For whom do we make original philosophy? Not for the historian but for ourselves in our pursuit of truth. All theories of restoration presume philosophical claims, and all philosophical claims presume some theory of the history of philosophy. In the case of philosophy, there is no one to say that the intentions of a philosopher are this and are not that, because any such claim is based on just those wider philosophical beliefs that are being thought through by philosophers. If as regards material objects from historical time we find the notion of truly perfect restoration to slip away on account of the intransigence of history as it clings to things, so much the more does every practicing philosopher cling to the invisible past. Our situation is that of imperfection. There is no progress without gross imperfection. Original philosophical work can little judge success or failure in interpreting the history of philosophy as an objective empirical matter, but it has not freed itself from consideration of philosophy in historical time. In the matter of studying the history of philosophy we as philosophers make this study whether we know it or like or not. We make a study that is perfectly free to be utterly imperfect with respect to the history of philosophy as a result of its endeavors to become more perfect as to true understanding of philosophical issues. The situation urged upon us by the traditionalist is, as a presentist might say, somewhat ridiculous. But it is unavoidable. That is the fuller truth of the matter.

This conflict is familiar: is logic a straight and neutral course? Or is philosophy in truth driven by something else? If the former is the case, perhaps advocacy of my idea is a hopeless, for these larger controversies are great battlefields harrowed by the mightiest weapons, in which a small cause is likely forgotten. But on the other hand it is the great capability of moral positions that they can stand and prevail without legions on their side. The case here will become in the end the moral imperative for philosophers to study the history of philosophy. The capacity for ethical import in all philosophical work drives this question in part, for the valid normative foundation of moral understanding is one of the two oldest and most important question in Western philosophy. The other is, what is real?—the question taken up by ontology. From the beginning these two—the descriptive and the prescriptive foundations—have been linked. In consequence, it makes little sense to talk of the method of philosophy without considering the role of these two issues in the historical time of philosophy.

The presentist, as I have described her, tends to argue that evidence and logic alone are the limiting conditions of philosophical practice and therefore that the authority of scientific truth so far we now establish it deflates the value of the study of the history of philosophy in the practice of philosophy. The quasi-traditionalist position I advocate shifts the focus from authority (*via* verifiability or logic) to the cultural and social

contexts of philosophical work. In this view, philosophy has an illuminative relationship to all culture, just as do book-binding, cabinet-making, and oil painting; but the relationship has distinct features of conspectus and abstraction. It serves to summarize all the rest of culture in its phases and aspects, in its parts and wholes, through a kind of inquiry using singularly complete concepts, though imperfectly so, and singularly useful because it provides for working with these concepts. I stress this broad sense of usefulness. By this I mean the ways in which philosophical work leads to the growth of knowledge, to the increase of wisdom, and to the new as it rolls through culture from the future. Consequently, it makes no sense to say that philosophy has no subject-matter and no methods special to itself. These claims about philosophy as a whole are broader than I can argue in the present essay. However, there is something more to the quasi-traditionalist argument. The shift from authority to context that I advocate secures history of philosophy studies from superannuation and uselessness, but an affirmative and constructive belief about philosophy as a whole is connected to the position I am taking, arising from the notion of context that I am using.

With respect to the role of historical knowledge in original philosophy, my claim here is simply this: that the arrow of philosophy does not fly unfledged. Thinkers with widely varying evaluations of philosophy share notions of its historicity similar to this claim. Some of these thinkers are not philosophers and tend not to see much reason to regard philosophy as an activity distinct from its fractal forms in society, technology, and the arts. Some historians and theorists of culture take this position.<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty argues with considerable justness that (a) “rational reconstruction,” i.e., de-historicized logical readings, fail, and that (b) what we call philosophical discourse in the honor-roll of philosophical royalty is no more philosophical than many, or every, other sort of discourse. Other non-relativist approaches, such as those of Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre, hold, like, Rorty, that there is more to philosophy than the analysis of concepts. Because the influences of cultural and social life naturally penetrate philosophical practice we must study the history of philosophy in order to excavate what has informed any current practice, endogenously as well as exogenously, and thereby become clearly aware of what one is doing.<sup>3</sup> In both Rorty, on the one hand, and in Taylor and MacIntyre, on the other, one sees that very different estimations of philosophical practice (and very different notions of truth) together highly value the self-knowledge to which the historical method ought to lead. That “what one is doing” in philosophy is contingent and particular can come to mean that it is wholly contingent and particular and yet is a distinct form of inquiry or knowledge just because it is contingent and particular. This is Quentin Skinner’s view, and he is correct to point out that historiographic reconstruction can have immense interest for philosophers by shedding light on the nature of action.<sup>4</sup>

My metaphor of the fledged arrow is consistent with these four views, but I mean something else as well that they miss or do not mean. Reconstructions are all ideal, that

is, they are all developed from the ideas of the historian or restorer, who also is an actor in history. This actor works through methods that give results by way of the unlikely, the likely, and the logically necessary. These are provisional results, often incompatible with other conclusions and speculations; or, to put it more fully, historical thought is inevitable but inconclusive, and is an unavoidable subversion of the practice of philosophy, no matter whether the topic for thought is as abstract as mathematics or as concrete as matters of ethics. Good, useful reasons for studying the history of philosophy—such as Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s—do not explain a principle common to both the practice and to the historiography of philosophy that abides in the person of the inquirer. Reasons arising from the situated position of the inquirer—such as Rorty’s and Skinner’s—are very good reasons. But we are in need of the out-loud articulation of a level deeper than the methodology of scholarly and academic work. If philosophy has a relation to the rest of human culture that distinguishes it from anything else, then the history of philosophy is important for reasons other than the benefits of the methodology. The history of philosophy, in my view, is witness to something that is not social but individual, something close to the core hope and hunger of the person who decides to pursue problems with such unrelenting honesty and energy that her inquiry becomes what we call philosophical. The calmly calculated reasons for “doing” history of philosophy do not take us into the impossible, conflicted reasons that produce philosophical practice. It is these reasons that philosophy reproduces in its history. Every philosophical practice is a reproduction of them. My claim sounds larger than it is: it excludes nothing but the denial of history; everything else is included just because philosophy is self-referential. The word I will use for one aspect of the particular self-referentiality of philosophy is *prolepsis*.

Philosophical thought is sometimes believed, especially in its systematic forms, to align the future direction of human activity and thought with itself, sometimes by claiming that the dissemination of a set of ideas does or will influence matters in such a way as to bring about effects that the ideas predict or advocate.<sup>5</sup> Philosophical work generally is exhortatory; often it is protreptic; but prophecy by philosophy seems to lead to esotericism. For the presentist, the philosopher as prophet must stand among the worst effects of immersing original work into the influences of historical time. An inclination to think of one’s ideas as part of a plan unfolding throughout history, best seen by one’s self, requires a suitably manipulated plan of past time in order to manage future time in the desired way. Mantic operations require the manipulation of terms to form a pseudo-empirical method of predicting the future, an *ars generalis* of future and past truth. It is irrationalist and obscurantist. This looks to be not at all reasonable and therefore no part of an honest labor of thought.

The proleptic capacity of philosophy is not a claim about the outward world but an inward experience of discovery. Prolepsis is finding in the present or the past something that ordinarily belongs in the future (including one’s own present) rather than in the

present or the past. The exemplary capacity of philosophy grows from its proleptic capacity. The former is a specialized but necessary form of the latter. It is specialized because the good example set by strong moral force—in projects either of thought or of action—has effect only in those highly distinctive circumstances in which the moral force of personal example perilously moves someone out of his or her ordinary way. Inspiration is double-faced: it may mean finding a cave of treasures, and it may mean having a rag-bag of unhappy surprises and self-obsessive hoarding attached to one's self. Response to this virtually infinitely complex product of recollections, judgments, motives, fears, and hopes best comes as the profound action of conscience, which in all its ramifications is the final mystery addressed by philosophical ethics. Nothing in the world can enforce the discipline of rigorous honesty upon a philosopher, or anyone else, beside personal commitment to the inquiry that exposure to strong moral and intellectual example brings. The exposure tends to evoke the commitment: this is its value, strength, and limit. This is the decision made by moral agents, each and every philosopher being a moral agent. By fortune, the strongest good examples of conscientious and courageous honesty are not all of one's own time. By fortune, we sometimes require the distance of time, with the knowledge of circumstances and consequences it gives us, to see clearly which persons are to be our moral exemplar. By fortune, we are sometimes lucky enough to recognize them in the same hours under the sun in which we live. But by necessity there is no way towards rigorous honesty except by one's commitment to the personhood of moral agency. This necessity abides with or without the benefit of being inspired by personal example because we are imperfect and exist in limiting circumstances. The philosopher is situated just like everyone else in the imperfect results of human historical time.

On the proleptic approach to the use of the history of philosophy in the practice of philosophy, a form of the traditionalist view prevails but only at the cost of the most rigorous honesty on the part of the inquirer in considering the whole moral and intellectual force of the parts of philosophical history with which one's project demands encounter. At first this might seem to leave all the choices in the hands of the practicing philosopher, where of course they certainly ought to be. But the proleptic approach also requires a significant change from the presentist approach for the original philosopher. It is this: that reception of the full moral and intellectual force of the philosophers or philosophical ideas one encounters requires an awareness of all parties' personal historical situations, especially his or her own. So even the presentist stands, if her method be fully understood, at personal face-to-face risk before the powerful intellectual and moral forces of great philosophers and of other thinkers and actors, and she ought to be committed to receiving these forces with rigorous honesty by being fully open to them as well as fully and independently critical. Independence is the free point of view not only in relation to the common philosophical trends of her day but also to the received opinions of the day about philosophers and philosophy in historical time. To fulfill this one must actually work on studying the history of philosophy.

The study of the history of philosophy is therefore a part of the vulnerability one individually takes on when honestly confronting profound thought, by great thinkers: their inescapable challenge puts us at a certain kind of personal risk, from person to person rather than from one set of social conditions to another set. Prolepsis is a name for this risk, this threat or promise; also, it connotes accident, incommensurability, and mystery. Philosophers necessarily confront a history that is no less demanding of our response to the force of other persons than are the material objects that they, among others, made or lived and died by. These are the non-physical aspects of objects. I suggest that the student of philosophy look upon the history of philosophy rather as the student of the history of material culture looks on objects: take into regard philosophical texts from historical time and the history of ideas as a kind of material object, being unavoidable fact, and then take into regard its strong intangible significances—the kinds of meaning, comprehensive and consequential, that philosophers trace even when the object of study has the form of a modern standard edition or is invisible or is lost. Even in such circumstances, a philosopher is a restorer of the imperfect understanding with which we look back into historical time, looking at reality by way of what is unlikely to be, what is likely to be, and what must be.

I am about to study something lost but chosen by me for the consequences of its topical interest and the critical questions it poses as to philosophical method. My thoughts come from my past experiences and my first experience in this research, and they are challenged at every moment by reflection on the method being applied to the topic. On the question of method, the subject of my research being a liminal case, it will, I hope, cast light on matters common to all methods of philosophy, for what is necessary to my project of research seems to me to say something about what is necessary and important in most philosophical work. This is not a command to be obeyed, but a tension that never goes away even when ignored. Therefore my freshest advice is to understand ideas as things absent from the actual world but as being in a special, illuminating relation to the world—just like historical time itself.

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<sup>1</sup>This use of the word “presentist” is to be rigidly distinguished from “presentism” as a position in the metaphysics of time.

<sup>2</sup>Leslie Kurke’s *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) is a superb and fascinating recent example of this kind of New Historicist reading applied to, and against, the origins of philosophical discourse and what she calls its Platonic (and, later, Hegelian) self-regard in modern historiography (esp. pp. 241-264).

<sup>3</sup>I refer here to essays by these philosophers in R. Rorty, Q. Skinner, and J. B. Schneewind, eds., *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): Richard Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres” (pp. 49-76); Charles C. W.

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Taylor, “Philosophy and its History” (pp. 17-30); and Alasdair Macintyre, “The Relationship of Philosophy to Its Past” (pp. 31-48).

<sup>4</sup>For this see Skinner’s early essay “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” in *History and Theory*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1969), pp. 3-53, esp. pp. 49-53.

<sup>5</sup>This thought owes much to the ideas of Prof. Eric Schliesser in his discussion at [www.newappsblog.com/2011/03/philosophic-prophecy-and-the-history-of-philosophy.html](http://www.newappsblog.com/2011/03/philosophic-prophecy-and-the-history-of-philosophy.html) and at related links.