

Marcel van Ackeren with Lee Klein (eds.), *Philosophy and the Historical Perspective*. Proceedings of the British Academy 214, Oxford, Oxford University Press for The British Academy, 2018, x + 253 pp., ISBN: 9780197266298. Cloth £65

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Can the historical perspective on philosophy contribute to current philosophy? What is its contribution? Is it dependent on a specific method? To what extent do we learn what philosophy is from the history of philosophy? How do our assumptions about the relationship between the historical and the systematic perspective affect our conception of philosophy itself (and *vice versa*)?

These questions, quoted almost verbatim from Marcel van Ackeren's introductory chapter (p. 2), constitute the horizon of problems that leading scholars seek to resolve in fourteen essays. The publication aims to make headway on a *via media* between two extremes of doing philosophy: between philosophy construed primarily as analysis of 'historical texts without reference to current debates and their terminology' on the one hand, and philosophy seen merely as solving 'current first-order philosophical questions without references to their predecessors' on the other hand (p. 1). In his introduction, van Ackeren reviews these tensions, chiefly within analytic philosophy, and he outlines how the subsequent essays contribute to solving the five questions above. His overview is so succinct and commendable that there is hardly any value in summarising the essays in yet another way. Nor do I dare to offer an alternative overarching theme to classify and assess the contributions, as this would amount to weighing in on the debate myself.

Rather, I would like to address this review to the practitioner of history of philosophy, to the scholar actively engaged in reading and interpreting philosophical texts of the past. *Prima facie*, it might seem that such an historian of philosophy can benefit but little from a general discussion about the value of the historical perspective for current philosophy. Indeed, much of her work and general outlook will be predetermined already by external factors. Her academic training, for instance, might have given her a certain way of exegesis. What counts as a philosophical text and which texts are worthy of being studied might be decided by her institutional affiliation. Last, her career prospects might suggest to her a particular community she wants to contribute to, a subfield that will have its own rules and expectations of what a contribution from the history of philosophy would be. This target audience might range from the community of contemporary analytic philosophers (e.g. philosophy of mind) or a subdiscipline within the history of philosophy (e.g. ancient philosophy) to historical studies (e.g. history of science or intellectual history) or even to the social sciences (e.g. sociology of knowledge). However, I believe that even given such constraints, the essays of the book will make a welcome contribution – not so much as a manual of arguments against those who doubt the value of history of philosophy, but rather as a

basis for further thoughts. It can thus foster reflections on the historian of philosophy's pre-suppositions and assumptions when practicing her own art. It can challenge her to give an account and a justification of these often implicit assumptions. At length, it can direct her to finding new areas of research within the given boundaries of her chosen field.

Some essays in the collection, lend themselves readily to reflections on methodology. We can think with Hans-Johann Glock (Chapter 2) and Ursula Renz (Chapter 14) on what a 'philosophical problem' is. John Marenbon (Chapter 3) offers reflections on the intrinsic value of 'real history of philosophy'. Marcel van Ackeren (Chapter 5) spells out criteria for interpretations of historical texts to be able to contribute to current philosophy. The history of ancient philosophy's liaison with analytic philosophy by Christof Rapp (Chapter 8), finally, is (among other things) a compelling case study in the methodology of a discipline.

Other essays can be a springboard for contemplating wider philosophical issues by being attentive to one's own practice in the history of philosophy. Thus Dominik Perler's elaborations on the 'alienation effect' can elicit a change in expectation of what to take away from historical texts and a shift of focus to those elements that lead to a 'denaturalisation of frameworks' (p. 153). In a similar way, Christina van Dyke (Chapter 10) offers an example of how to use history to fulfil a 'corrective and complementary role' (p. 155) by discussing medieval mysticism. The relationship between philosophy and economics in Smith and Hegel, reflected upon by Lisa Herzog (Chapter 15), helps to see implicit assumptions that have been obscured by disciplinary divisions. Related, but markedly different is the Nietzschean case by Brian Leiter (Chapter 12) that the history of philosophy yields an abductive argument for giving up philosophy as currently practiced because it has not succeeded in generating philosophical consensus. The reader can complement and challenge Leiter's account through Thomas Grundmann's contribution (Chapter 4) where it is argued that philosophy makes progress, but its progress is very slow.

At last, the collection contains refreshing chapters on the philosophy of history. Michael Della Rocca (Chapter 6) embeds the study of history of philosophy into his theory of meaning; as a corollary, his monistic insights into meaning necessitate the study of historical texts. We also find two Hegelian contributions: John Skorupski (Chapter 7) investigates how reason is active in history by reflecting on what 'rational explanation' is in philosophy, while Robert Pippin (Chapter 11) takes up Hegel's claims about collective self-deception and relates it to current politics. In Chapter 14, Martin Kusch revisits his 'sociology of philosophical knowledge' (SPK), responds to criticism and argues that philosophy that welcomes 'a reflection on its own conditions of possibility' (p. 211) must encourage SPK.

It may be granted to Ryle that thinking about running (while running) would not make us better runners (cf. p. 3), but we should resist the (perhaps) analogous claim that thinking about our intellectual activities (in parallel to pursuing them) would not make us better thinkers. Hence I am convinced that this collection will bear many fruits when taken up by practising historians of philosophy to reflect on their own scholarly activities.

Then the themes, reflections and arguments of this book will be woven into concrete history of philosophy, giving both the general discussions of the essays and the specific historical works sharper contours, a richer texture and more nuance.