



THE BURDEN OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Timothy J. Madigan

Alfred North Whitehead once remarked that all of Western Philosophy consists of footnotes to Plato. While this is surely not literally true, no one can dispute the powerful influence that Socrates' friend has had on much subsequent philosophical work. Countless volumes have been devoted to examining his basic ideas and their impact throughout the ages. It may well be that one cannot truly understand philosophy without somehow trying to come to grips with Plato.

But if impact is an important criterion for understanding a figure's importance in the history of philosophy, and if one should be familiar with the most influential figures of the past before attempting to 'do' philosophy oneself, then what would constitute the list of such individuals whose works must be reckoned with? To whom must attention be paid? Aquinas, Descartes, Kant and Marx? Or Berkeley, Hume, Mill and Dewey? And what about such thinkers as Bruno, Fichte, Vico and Feuerbach, who are considered by some to be major figures that helped to shape the very nature of philosophical inquiry, and yet are dismissed by most cognoscenti as being at best minor figures in the history of the field? What level of knowledge, if any, should one have of their works? Must one immerse oneself into the numerous volumes produced by 'the Big Names' or is it enough to have a nodding familiarity with their various views? Certainly a deep knowledge and association with as many viewpoints as possible in the thousands-year old history of philosophy would be a beneficial attribute. Had we world enough and time, no doubt it would be a goal worth aiming at. But few of us will have the luxury of living to the ripe old age of ninety-seven, which Bertrand Russell, author of the best-selling *A History of Western Philosophy*, achieved. And for all his great age and familiarity with his philosophical predecessors, even he was criticized for having at best a shallow (and at worst a biased) opinion of most of them, and himself claimed that the only philosopher whose work he could honestly say he completely understood was Leibniz.

In a very real sense, philosophy's history weighs heavily upon it. To read and comprehend the works of even a relatively few philosophers who are generally considered to be members in good standing of the pantheon of great thinkers would take an enormous amount of time and effort. And this is not even taking into consideration the massive amount of secondary and tertiary literature devoted to them.

How then do we deal with the sheer weight of information which has accumulated over the centuries? The history of philosophy continues on unabated—future generations will have to deal not only with the ancient and modern thinkers we of the early Twenty-First Century seek to absorb (from Thales to Rorty and everything in-between) but also with the greats and near-greats yet unborn. Where will it end? Are philosophers ultimately fated to drown in a sea of words of ideas?

One of the most prevalent techniques is to simply ignore entire periods in the history of philosophy, dismissing them as not very important stages. Indeed, the majority of surveys and courses in the history of philosophy usually omit any lengthy discussion of the medieval period (roughly from 300AD to 1600AD). Over one thousand years of thought bracketed out! The attitude taken by those who do so is summed up rather well by Walter Kaufman, who writes:

“... medieval philosophy was so different from both Greek and modern philosophy that it is somewhat misleading to call it by the same name. And if philosophy were defined as a search for truth that involves following arguments and evidence, without recourse to authority, wherever they may lead, frequently arriving at unforeseen conclusions, then medieval philosophy would not deserve the name at all.” (*The Faith of a Heretic*, 1961, p.31).

This air of nonchalance is rather disturbing. Should one really ignore such writers as Ockham, Augustine, Boethius, Abelard, Maimonides and Averroes because they were not truly ‘philosophers’? To define them out of existence seems a shoddy thing to do. Their influence on the history of philosophy is easily proven, and certainly it is a gross misrepresentation and oversimplification to hold that they were not concerned with seeking the truth, but only with reconciling their views to the party line of theological doctrines. If this were the case, Ockham would not have had to flee from the Pope’s wrath, Averroes would not have had to fear death at the hands of enraged clerics, and Abelard would have led a much more settled existence.

Far too many histories of philosophy act as if the period between Plato and Descartes simply did not exist. Even those who admit the importance of the medieval period are likely to give a triage-type defense—to make a course workable or a textbook readable, something’s got to be sacrificed. And besides, as Kaufman would no doubt concur, the medieval period was chiefly concerned with matters of faith, which can best be dealt with in specialized courses on the philosophy of religion, or better yet in courses on the history of religion. Let’s move on.

This raises another important point to consider when addressing the burden of the history of philosophy—is such history progressive in nature? If it is, then perhaps one’s knowledge of the writings and ideas of the many philosophers who have furthered this progress need not be so all-encompassing. We can concern our-

selves with what is important in this process of growth, while ignoring those issues (and the thinkers who addressed them) which are no longer relevant. Richard Rorty, often considered the most influential contemporary philosopher, puts it this way:

“We should treat the history of philosophy as we treat the history of science. In the latter field, we have no reluctance in saying that we know better than our ancestors what they were talking about. We do not think it anachronistic to say that Aristotle had a false model of the heavens, or that Galen did not understand how the circulatory system worked. We take the pardonable ignorance of great dead scientists for granted. We should be equally willing to say that Aristotle was unfortunately ignorant that there are no such things as real essences, or Leibniz that God does not exist, or Descartes that the mind is just the central nervous system under an alternative description. We hesitate merely because we have colleagues who are themselves ignorant of such facts, and whom we courteously describe not as ‘ignorant’, but as ‘holding different philosophical views.’ Historians of science have no colleagues who believe in crystalline spheres, or who doubt Harvey’s account of circulation, and they are thus free from such constraints.” (‘The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres’, in *Philosophy in History*, 1988, p.50).

So much for arguments for essences, proofs of God’s existence, or discussions of the mind/body problem. But is philosophy really so akin to science? If so, why do certain nagging problems—including the three mentioned above—keep coming back throughout the ages? Can’t we finally solve them to everyone’s satisfaction and just move on?



Perhaps the history of philosophy is more like the history of art than it is like the history of science. Just as there are different schools of art, such as Realism, Impressionism, Surrealism, and Pop Art, which have some connections with each other but which can also be treated as separate entities, perhaps there are schools of philosophy, such as Platonism, Thomism, Marxism, Pragmatism

and Deconstructionism, which can likewise be treated as separate entities. In this sense, there is no need to be concerned with the overall history of philosophy. Rather, one should be concerned with the history of the school one belongs to. For example, a Pragmatist would want to know the influence that Peirce had upon James, and James upon Dewey, and Dewey upon Rorty. There would be some interest as well in the influence of figures outside the school in regards to their influence on those within. So, a Pragmatist could trace the Kantian elements in Peirce's writings, thereby momentarily leaving the Pragmatist schoolyard and briefly entering into the Kantian school's domain. But he or she need never enter the Thomistic schoolyard, or bother to learn the history of the pre-Socratics or the Phenomenologists.

It would make things much easier if philosophy were as simple as that, or as easy to compartmentalize. But it is not. The connections and influences do not obey such easy labels (nor, for that matter, do they in the history of art). To join a 'school' is in many ways to try and break free from the burden of the history of philosophy, but all one basically accomplishes is the setting up of artificial barriers. There are periodical calls from philosophers who are frustrated by the fragmentations of the present to return to the writings of Hegel or Hume or Aquinas or Aristotle and get right with fundamentals—a 'Back to Kant' maneuver, as it were. But one cannot ignore all the work that has gone on after these writings became known. Rorty may be mistaken when he claims that we can simply put aside all discussion of real essences, but can anyone who wants to come to grips with Aristotle blithely ignore all the work that has been done on this topic since the time of his death? In other words, what would Aristotle likely have said about Quine's anti-essentialist arguments? Would he have been as convinced by them as Rorty seems to be?

It might appear that philosophers fight the same battles over and over again, under different guises. Thus, Rorty's hermeneutics-based view has been dismissed by some as warmed-over Sophistry. The history of philosophy might be no more than a bad case of eternal recurrence: old problems never die, they just get re-named. If this is the case, then one need only have a superficial knowledge of the history of philosophy—just get clear on what the eternal problems are, and the finite ways they can be dealt with, and ignore the messy historical details. If there is no real progress, there is no need for an in-depth evaluation.

Yet this 'eternal recurrence' picture is not very convincing. It seems to arise from a too-strict adherence to a problems centered

approach to philosophy. By taking such issues as the existence of essences, proofs of God's existence, and the mind/body problem out of the context in which they arose, one loses a sense as to why various philosophers felt they had to be addressed at all. The problems seem to take on a life of their own, with the philosophers merely acolytes fated to serve them. While it is the case, for instance, that Plato was much concerned with the nature of Justice, we cannot therefore be certain that his discussions of this topic were strictly akin to present-day discussions. By taking 'Justice' as something a-historical, we face the danger of assuming that the idea itself has never changed: that whoever speaks of it necessarily, in all conditions and at all times, speaks of one and the same thing.

John Dewey, in his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, tried to demonstrate how unsound this view of the history of philosophy really is. He writes:

“The very things that made the great systems objects of esteem and admiration in their own socio-cultural contexts are in large measure the very grounds that deprive them of ‘actuality’ in a world whose main features are different to an extent indicated by our speaking of the ‘scientific revolution’, the ‘industrial revolution’, and the ‘political revolution’ of the last few hundred years. A plea for reconstruction cannot, as far as I can see, be made without giving considerable attention to the background within which and in regard to which reconstruction is to take place.” (*Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 1948, p.viii.)

That is to say, as the needs and concerns of a society changes, so too does its philosophy. The history of philosophy must be studied with this ever in one's mind.

This being the case, if one wishes to understand the problems one is addressing, one must have a good historical sense. Dewey was interested in mapping out the causes of various changes in thought throughout the ages, so that one could understand why we have arrived at our present-day philosophical systems. There is a constant state of development occurring in philosophy, but it is a development which does not advance in strictly linear fashion. The voices of the past are constantly being heard: but they are re-interpreted to fit our present-day concerns. Dewey tries to make explicit this often-underestimated point. If Plato were to speak to us directly, we probably could not understand him, for the times and social conditions have changed so radically that it would be in

a very real sense a different world for him. Perhaps Aristotle and Quine wouldn't be able to discuss the nature of essences after all.

But does such an historical sense mean that, before one does philosophy one must have a near-complete knowledge of all that has taken place beforehand—not only the writings of previous thinkers, but also the economic, political and social conditions under which they wrote? Surely this would discourage all but the most anal-retentive from ever entering the field of philosophy.

The burden of the history of philosophy need not be so heavy a load, provided one does not attempt to write what Hegel would call a universal history of philosophy. That is clearly an impossible task, and it becomes ever more unrealizable as time marches on. It seems that what is needed is a realization that this is impossible, coupled with a willingness to learn as much as one needs to about the figures of the past who grappled with the problems one currently confronts. For Rorty, the nature of essences is a non-issue, but there are many philosophers today who still consider it a real issue, and who still find fruitful the discussions of essences by Aristotelians, Thomists and other thinkers. Who knows what other philosophical issues, laying dormant for now, might once again rear their mighty heads and dominate the discussions of the Twenty-First Century? I for one have given serious thought to reviving the ancient argument that the ultimate essence of the universe is water and thereby starting a 'Back to Thales' movement.

We should cheerfully admit that our knowledge of the history of philosophy, taken in its totality, is tentative at best. It is not a unique problem for philosophers. After all, a similar dilemma faces many academics today. Few English professors are equally expert in Chaucer, Shakespeare, James Joyce and Mickey Spillane. The weight of material forces one to specialize, and to focus one's attention on mastering certain areas of one's chosen field.

As the history of philosophy becomes ever more crowded with systems and people, elbowing for position and fighting for space on library shelves, the awareness of the great efforts made by the figures of the past should be kept in mind. Perhaps it is sheer hubris to think that one can possess a real understanding of this history—but it is a worthy challenge to try to master as much of it as one can. It is significant that Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, which he himself never considered to be one of his own major contributions to the field, became a best-seller as soon as it appeared in 1944 and has remained in print ever since. The desire for an overall view of what this history involves remains a strong one,

especially when one is first introduced to the very idea of philosophy and begins to wonder “What’s it all about, Bertie”?

We can take some solace from Pythagoras, the learned individual who is credited with coining the term ‘philosophy’ itself. In doing so, he admitted that he was not a possessor of wisdom, but rather a seeker of it. It was the quest for wisdom which gave meaning to his existence. The history of philosophy is an ever-changing, ever-shifting map of the many paths taken by noted individuals in this quest. No one can travel all its highways and byways, but no one should thus disparage the paths not taken. They might just end up being paths one will stumble upon unexpectedly one day hence, and it’s helpful to have a map in hand, just in case.



Dr. Timothy J. Madigan received his PhD in philosophy at State University of New York at Buffalo, 1999 and is Editorial Director of the University of Rochester Press.

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