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On the Different Understandings of the History of Philosophy

ABSTRACT: This article considers the reasons for studying the history of philosophy. It makes a distinction between: (1) treating past philosophers' texts as a source of help and inspiration for solving contemporary philosophical problems and (2) studying texts for their own sake to discover, as far as it is possible, their authorial meanings. Those who choose option (2) should consciously follow a methodology which enables them to question the assumptions of their own age and to make every effort to understand the problems which philosophers from the past tried to solve in the context of their time and within their own conceptual framework. To avoid anachronisms, historians of philosophy need to identify questions which the ancient author intended his text to answer, not the questions which we would like him to be answering, bearing in mind that thinkers of the past talked not to us but to readers of their time.

KEYWORDS: history of philosophy • methodology • anachronism • interpretation • authorial meaning • Aristotle • *Nicomachean Ethics*

This article is concerned with views on the status of the history of philosophy and its relationship with philosophy. Quine is quoted as having said, “there are two sorts of people interested in philosophy: those interested in philosophy and those interested in the history of philosophy”¹. Quine’s division could be taken as expressing a condescending attitude to the work of historians of philosophy: some thinkers (those really interested in philosophy) try to solve valid philosophical problems – they try to get their own theory right; others (the historians of philosophy) try to understand past philosophers’ theories – they are “strangely interested in someone else’s wrong theory”². Regardless of the value different people attach to the history of philosophy, the point Quine was making and which I want to concentrate

¹ R. Piercey, *The Uses of the Past from Heidegger to Rorty. Doing Philosophy Historically*, Cambridge, p. 1.

² C. Wilson, *Is the History of Philosophy Good for Philosophy?*, [in:] *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy*, T. Sorell, G.A.J. Rogers (eds.), Oxford 2005, p. 66.

on here is that solving philosophical problems and studying the history of philosophy are two separate fields between which we should carefully distinguish. The distinctions may sometimes not be sharp, but we should consciously choose which of these two directions of research we want to pursue, and consciously follow different methodologies to achieve different aims.

My philosophical interests are in the history of ancient philosophy, mainly in Aristotle's ethics. The reason I started paying special attention to the ways the history of philosophy was and is conducted was the discovery that the only Polish translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* is misleading to the point that it contradicts the Aristotelian original³. Translations, particularly from Greek and Latin, of course form an integral part of the studies of history of philosophy. Translators are unavoidably interpreters of historical texts who bring to their work their own set of assumptions. The translator of *Nicomachean Ethics* into Polish did not accept as possible that a great philosopher from a civilization separated from us by nearly 2500 years, who was unavoidably unaware of the enormous cultural developments which have created and influenced the contemporary western world, could inhabit a world organized by a different conceptual framework which included a hierarchy of values very different from ours. In the first book of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle sets out a clear dichotomy: which of the two types of legitimate activities available to men in their lives – one (*bios politikos*) according to ethical virtues or the other (*bios theoretikos*) according to intellectual virtues – is conducive to *eudaimonia* (the greatest good men can attain)? In the middle books Aristotle discusses both kinds of virtues. In the tenth and final book, Aristotle demonstrates and emphasises the superiority of intellectual virtues over ethical virtues and declares *eudaimonia* to be the activity according to the intellectual virtue *sophia*. The Polish reader reads however that the highest *eudaimonia* “is the activity according to the ethical virtue” (“szczęście jest działaniem zgodnym z dzielnością etyczną”) because *sophia* is the best type of ethical virtue (jest “jej rodzajem najlepszym”⁴). Aristotle in his Greek original concludes that the best type of activity (out of two under consideration) is an activity according to the intellectual virtue

³ I discuss the Polish translation of *Nicomachean Ethics* in: L. Skowroński *Zarzut systematycznego błędu interpretacyjnego w tłumaczeniu „Etyki nikomachejskiej”* (*On the systematic error in the Polish translation of the Nicomachean Ethics*), „Przegląd Filozoficzny” 1 (2007), pp. 49–66; *Idem*, *Dlaczego konieczne jest nowe polskie tłumaczenie „Etyki nikomachejskiej” Arystotelesa? (Why is a New Polish Translation of Aristotle's “Nicomachean Ethics” Necessary?)*, „Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej” 56 (2011), pp. 53–68.

⁴ Arystoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, [w:] *idem*, *Dzieła wszystkie*, t. 5, przełożyła, opracowała i wstępem opatrzyła D. Gromska, Warszawa 2000, p. 290.

while in the translation the Polish reader learns that it is an activity according to the ethical virtue. The mistaken translation is not limited to the last book of *Nicomachean Ethics*. The translator did her best to convey to the reader in all books that *Nicomachean Ethics* is fundamentally about ethical virtues and that ethical virtues are fundamental. I am sure that the translator did not intend to mislead her readers. On the contrary, she put great effort into making the meaning of the text as correct as possible, including in those places where the Greek text seemed to have a sense that was strange or incredible for a twentieth-century reader. Unfortunately, by removing the strong dichotomy of the original text between ethical and intellectual virtues she defeated the whole point of the argument around which *Nicomachean Ethics* is structured. As a result, Polish readers have a book which essentially contradicts the ancient original. The case of this translation illustrates compellingly how important it is for historians to question the assumptions of their own age and to make every effort to understand the problems which philosophers from the past tried to solve in the context of their time and within their own conceptual framework.

1. Different understandings of the history of philosophy

The history of philosophy as it is perceived today seems to reconstruct history in such a way as to show the evolution of philosophy from its beginnings until today. You could ask if the subject of the studies of the historian of philosophy could be done differently. The answer is given in the short survey below. In what follows, I refer frequently to the article *The history of philosophy as a discipline*⁵ by Michael Frede and I am treating his views as representative of the views of a larger group of historians who see the history of philosophy as vitally different from philosophy itself. Frede (who died in 2007) was one of the prominent historians of ancient philosophy in the last 40 years, so his thoughts on the history of philosophy are the most relevant to my research, particularly as historians of ancient philosophy do not often write articles (let alone books) on the purposes, benefits and methodology of their discipline. I also refer to the thoughts of Quentin Skinner and Richard Rorty on the meaning of the history of philosophy. Skinner is one of the founders of the school of historians of ideas linked with the University of Cambridge⁶, whose

⁵ M. Frede, *The History of Philosophy as a Discipline*, "The Journal of Philosophy", 85 (1988), pp. 666–672.

⁶ A very short but informative sketch of the development of the ideas of Cambridge historians (sometimes called "Cantabrigian historians") can be found in E. Perreau-Saussine, *Quentin Skinner in Context*, "The Review of Politics" 69 (2007), pp. 106–122.

aim is to try to reconstruct the intellectual context in which past thinkers created their theories in order to evaluate them within that context, as opposed to the traditional way of evaluation according to the truth status of the claims their theories made. Rorty is probably the most widely-known thinker out of the three, although not necessarily because of his views on the methodology of the history of philosophy. In 1984, Skinner, Rorty, and J. B. Schneewind (a leading historian of ethics) published a collection of articles, *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, which is perceived as a kind of landmark in the history of the subject. (Charles Taylor, Alasdair Macintyre, Michael Frede, Myles Burnyeat and Michael Ayers were among authors of these essays).

1a. Doxographical traditions

Frede points out that the first books entitled ‘history of philosophy’, which appeared in the seventeenth century, such as *Historia Philosophica* (Leiden, 1655) by Georg Horn, and *Historia Critica Philosophiae* (Leipzig, 1742–1767) by Jacob Brucker are not histories in the contemporary sense. They do not try to show the development of philosophy, and they do not follow a chronological order. They belong to a much older doxographical tradition, beginning at least as far back as Aristotle. In this doxographical tradition, philosophers were interested in their discipline’s past, because they believed that at least some of the old views were still interesting for them and helpful in solving current problems – some of them were simply true, and others, even if they were false, were false in a way that was illuminating for current arguments. One of the bases of this approach to the history of philosophy was a conviction that there exists a set of fundamental philosophical problems (for example, one of them could be the search for the greatest human good) and it is beneficial to see how these perennial problems were treated by thinkers from different historical epochs and cultures. Even Immanuel Kant, when talking about historians of philosophy, seems to be referring to doxographers.

1b. The history of philosophy as a history of stages of approaching the truth

At the end of the eighteenth century, we meet a new understanding of the history of philosophy. Frede refers to Meiners’s history of 1786 as the first to adopt a chronological method, a very short time after which histories by authors like Tiedemann (1791), Buhl (1796) and Tennemann (1798) were published. Those historians treated the views of past philosophers as fundamen-

tally obsolete. Their philosophical value, if there was any in such out-of-date theories, was supposed to be in revealing the stages which philosophy went through on the way to the truth, i.e. to the views of today. These histories were written from a particular philosophical point of view, the point of view of the contemporary philosophy of each historian. This type of history shows how contemporary philosophy was born from the past, how the views of successive philosophers gradually get closer to the truth, i.e. to the views believed as true by the historian.

1c. History of philosophy which does not evaluate past theories

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the type of history of philosophy just described was rejected by historians of whom the first best known representative was Eduard Zeller (1814 – 1908), author of the monumental *Philosophie der Griechen*. The new type of researcher of intellectual history does not make assumptions about its philosophical value – i.e. he does not make assumptions that past views are philosophically worthy or not worthy of his interest. What is important is that even at the moment of choosing the subject of research, the historian is not led by belief or hope that the result of his research may contribute towards solving contemporary philosophical problems or contribute to any other field of contemporary knowledge. Speaking bluntly, Quine's 'true' philosopher, i.e. a person who is truly interested in philosophy understood as the study with the aim of finding out the truth or the true theory of something, has a right to see research by this type of historian as philosophically (and probably not only philosophically) totally pointless⁷. Oddly enough, Frede represents the view of the historians

⁷ A contempt for the mentality of 'historians' and their intellectual abilities was expressed forthrightly by Descartes: "If a man were capable of finding the foundations of the sciences, he would be wrong to waste his life in finding scraps of knowledge hidden in the corners of libraries; and if he were no good for anything else but that, he would not be capable of choosing and ordering what he found", quoted in R. Nichols, *Why is the History of Philosophy Worth Studying?*, "Metaphilosophy" 37 (2006), p. 44. C.D. Broad, who before the Second World War was Knightsbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge, wrote in his popular book *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, which had many editions: "The minute study of the works of great philosophers from the historical and philological point of view is an innocent and even praiseworthy occupation for learned men. But it is not philosophy; and to me at least, it is not interesting. My primary interest in this book is to find out what is true and what is false about ethics; and the statements of our authors [Broad here presents the views of Spinoza, Butler, Hume, Kant and Sidgwick] are important to me only in so far as they suggest possible answers to this question." Broad treats those famous authors ('men of genius') as participants in a discussion on the same topic. So the "clash of their opinions may strike a light [in Broad's book] which will enable

of philosophy who are interested in exactly that type of historical approach. What are their reasons for pursuing this seemingly useless research?

2. The threat of anachronism

Readers of philosophical treatises from the past are faced with a kind of *Catch 22* scenario. When they are reading books by the great dead philosophers⁸, treating them as partners in contemporary discussions, they are not actually reading the books according to the intentions of their ancient authors, who simply could not be aware of the twenty-first century's problems and discussions (i.e. they read them mistakenly, anachronistically – by reading into the old books their own modern interests, alien to their ancient authors). On the other hand, if the books are read on their own terms, they and their famous ancient authors may turn out to be time wasters from the point of view of people eager to solve currently fashionable problems⁹. Frede sides with the historians who claim that there is value in finding out the true beliefs of thinkers from the past regardless of their usefulness for contemporary philosophy. As Rorty picturesquely put it:

the historian of science, who can imagine what Aristotle might have said in a dialogue in heaven with Aristarchus and Ptolemy, knows something interesting which remains unknown to the Whiggish astrophysicist who sees only how Aristotle would have been crushed by Galileo's arguments¹⁰.

Why is it not possible that the great dead philosophers shared our interests? To answer this question it is useful to turn for help to Quentin

us [who continue this perennial discussion] to avoid the mistakes into which they have fallen", C.D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, London 1944, pp. 1–2.

⁸ This is how Richard Rorty likes to refer to these wise men. See R. Rorty, *The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres*, [in:] *Philosophy in History. Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, R. Rorty, J. Schneewind, Q. Skinner (eds.), Cambridge 1984, pp. 49–75.

⁹ Reading old texts often becomes a tiresome effort with which "we confine our interpretive activity to making their falsehoods look less silly by placing them in the context of the benighted times in which they were written", cf. R. Rorty, *The Historiography of Philosophy*, p. 49.

¹⁰ R. Rorty, *The Historiography of Philosophy*, p. 51. The adjective 'whiggish' refers to the title of the book by Cambridge historian H. Butterfield *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) about the interpretation of history which sees past events as 'progressive' if they were leading to the present state of affairs or 'reactionary' if they happened to slow down development towards today's world; whiggish – judging the past from the present point of view.

Skinner. In his influential article *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas* (1969) Skinner suggested that those historians who want to discover authorial meanings of the texts must obey the following constraint: “no agent can be said to have meant or achieved something which they could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what they had meant or achieved”¹¹. It does not exclude the possibility that somebody else could describe what an agent did or said in a clearer way than the agent himself did, but “it does exclude that an acceptable account of an agent’s behaviour could ever survive the demonstration that it was dependent on the use of criteria of description and classification not available to the agent”¹². So, it is possible to improve on the agent’s account only if it is done in his own conceptual language, but it is not possible to describe correctly his actions or statements with the use of concepts unavailable to the agent. Whatever the agent intentionally did or said had some meaning for him, and that meaning cannot be reproduced in concepts unknown to the agent. Any description using concepts foreign to the agent, however compelling and illuminating it may be from certain points of view, will not be an account of what the agent meant. Readers of old texts tend to fall automatically into an anachronistic mode of reading. The task of the historian is to follow a method of study which would enable him to avoid this natural but misleading way of looking at texts from the past.

3. Doxography versus non-evaluative history

So past texts and theories can be treated in many ways. The important thing is that the historian should be conscious of what exactly he wants to get out of reading a text. Doxographical approaches could bring very interesting results, but one could ask if the term ‘history’ is not used in a confusing way by doxographers, who treat past philosophers as partners in contemporary discussions on eternal, i.e. contemporary, problems. It is important to realize the fundamental difference between doxographical research and historical research as understood by Frede. The ‘history of philosophy’ in the doxographical tradition, which has commonly been practised by philosophers up to and including today, means, in Frede’s opinion, imputing contemporary interests and philosophical views to past thinkers. Frede is not rejecting the possibility of contemporary philosophers using past ideas. The possible

¹¹ Quoted after: Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1 *Regarding Method*, Cambridge 2002, p.77. The quotation is slightly changed (as compared with the version from 1969) in this new edition of the article.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 78.

dialogue with past philosophers, however, needs an introductory phase of historical studies recommended by him, studies of past philosophy from its own point of view, not from our point of view. When reading an old text, we need to identify questions which the ancient author intended the text to answer, not the questions which in our opinion it should be answering. Those original questions (although for us invisible in a superficial reading) may be explicit in the text or may be implied by the answers which the text gives us. The most common, but very doubtful, assumption is that the author of the text was asking himself the same questions as we ask ourselves. However, while reading his text, we have the impression that his answers (to our questions) were very muddled, unskilful, and finally wrong. Apart from deciding that past philosophers were less skilful in answering perennial (i.e. our) questions, it is reasonable to accept that they might have been answering their own questions (which were different from ours). Doxographers do not realize how difficult it is to escape from our own assumptions and to reconstruct the original views of thinkers from the past, especially those from the very distant past. Neither do they appreciate the difficulties in explaining and presenting the old views in a way that they may be taken into account in contemporary debates and compared with contemporary views.

4. Reconstructing the views of an ancient philosopher in his historical context

The student of a historical text who realizes the extent of the difficulties has to make a conscious choice.

– He may give up struggling with these difficulties and interpret a text, for example by Aristotle, in a way which does not necessarily faithfully reflect Aristotle's idea, but is in an Aristotelian spirit. What really matters is that it is a way which is interesting and inspiring from a contemporary point of view.

– Or he may decide to reconstruct Aristotle's view as far as it is possible to do so.

An author who refers to a past philosopher should indicate what exactly he is doing. It is particularly important if he has chosen the first option (above). An author who is clearly saying:

Though in what follows I will speak incautiously about what Hume's views are about the nature of reasons and rationality, my real interest lies not in what Hume, the historical figure, thought about these matters [...]. What really interests me, then, is not what Hume himself thought about these matters [but – L. S.] what a Humean, a contemporary

philosopher whose philosophical views have been greatly influenced by certain of Hume's writings, would have to say¹³.

makes it much easier for the reader (particularly for a reader who is interested in Hume – the historical figure) to understand the author's text, and avoids completely unnecessary misunderstandings. An example of a similar fair warning is given by David Wiggins, who writes: "In so far as Aristotle enters here, that is not in the cause of our interpreting him but chiefly in order for us to make use of his thoughts about a question that was closely akin to von Wright's"¹⁴. Unfortunately, although authors often pay 'cavalier attention'¹⁵ to past philosophers' texts which they quote, they are very rarely conscious of that, and it is even rarer for them to inform the reader about it.

One who decides on the second option should read ancient texts not according to contemporary philosophy's rules, but according to the rules of the time in which they were written. It is necessary to accept their historical context and base the research on the views available to the author of the text in his time. Historical context may be characterized in an important way by details which do not normally interest philosophers or do not have philosophical meaning for contemporary philosophers. Examples of this sort, such as heavenly bodies perceived as conscious beings¹⁶, some animals being

¹³ M. Smith, *Humean Rationality*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Rationality*, A.R. Mele, P. Rawling, (eds.) Oxford 2004, p. 76.

¹⁴ D. Wiggins, *What is the Order Among the Varieties of Goodness? A Question Posed by von Wright; and a Conjecture Made by Aristotle*, "Philosophy" 83 (2009), p. 183. Wiggins discusses concepts of the good as presented by von Wright in his book *The Varieties of Goodness*.

¹⁵ R. Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, Cambridge 1998, p. 274.

¹⁶ As recently as the turn of the sixteenth century, Johannes Kepler, one of the heroes of modern science "believed that planets had sense perception and consciously followed laws of movement that were grasped by their 'mind'", S.W. Hawking, L. Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, New York 2010, p. 25. This conviction about the planets' consciousness can be found at least as far back as in Plato, who wrote that observations of the regularity of the movements of heavenly bodies "awakened wonder, and aroused in the breasts of close students the suspicion, which has now been converted into an accepted doctrine, that were they without souls, and by consequence without intelligence, they would never have conformed to such precise computations", (Plato, *Laws*, 967b translation by A.E. Taylor). Hawking and Mlodinow remind us that Newton (who was a deeply religious man who wrote as much on theology as on physics, a fact which is now treated as irrelevant or even awkward) believed that God can intervene in the functioning of the universe, and that he really does intervene. If, for example, it were true that God accepted the plea of Joshua to make the sun stand still to give him time to take vengeance on his enemies ("And the sun stood still [...] in the middle of the sky and delayed its setting for almost a whole day". *Joshua* 10:13), then according to Newton's own laws, the earth would have to have stopped turning, and everything which was not very strongly fixed to the ground would

born out of nothing, and divine intervention, we automatically ignore and reject as obvious nonsense which we only find embarrassing (according to our judgment) for the philosopher who believed in them. We have to remember that most of that which should be included in the history of philosophy does not at present have philosophical meaning for us¹⁷. For philosophers of those times, however, the contexts which to us are irrelevant or embarrassing were the contexts in which they were working and to which their theories were reactions. When reading old texts, we automatically ignore uninteresting details of their historical environment and details which are unacceptable for us, and we interpret them only within a framework of those things which seem to us to be still philosophically significant and acceptable.

Taking into account differences resulting from the historical context and the individual circumstances of the life of the philosopher for the correct understanding of his thought is not a particularly new postulate. It is possible to find it as early as in the writings of Giambattista Vico, a Neapolitan philosopher of the turn of the seventeenth century. Vico claimed that belief in one and only one framework able to represent reality is faulty. According to Vico, people of different cultures and historical epochs ask different questions about the world and the universe. As a result, they give different answers, which are formulated in symbols and concepts that are characteristic of the particular culture or epoch. These symbols and concepts are either unknown in different cultures or perceived by later epochs as primitive or out-of-date. Unfortunately, Vico's writings were not widely read in his lifetime, so his ideas were being discovered again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Isaiah Berlin writes:

have been flung into space at a speed of almost 2,000 kilometres per hour – quite a big price to pay for a delayed sunset. As Hawking and Mlodinow comment, “none of this bothered Newton himself” (*ibidem*, p. 75). Today, it seems unbelievable for a scientist of Newton's standing to have been convinced of such interventions by God while knowing about their physical consequences. Nevertheless, Newton was convinced. Recalling past thinkers' baffling views is in accordance with the following advice by Leszek Kołakowski: “When matters are apparently clear and apparently understandable, it is necessary to sow healing confusion, and to cover those apparent clarities with a shadow of doubt. I know that it is an irritating activity” (my translation), L. Kołakowski, *Moje słuszne poglądy na wszystko*, Kraków 1999, p. 5. Recalling ‘embarrassing prejudices’ is irritating but at the same time throws a shadow of doubt on our belief that rational people even a very long time ago must have shared our ‘obvious’ convictions.

¹⁷ John Herman Randall, in the first volume of his history of philosophy, comments that “The problems of one age are ultimately irrelevant to those of another”, quoted in G. Hatfield, *The History of Philosophy as Philosophy*, [in:] *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy*, T. Sorell, G.A.J. Rogers, (eds.), Oxford 2005, p. 87.

Vico's [...] importance in the history of Enlightenment consists in his insistence on the plurality of cultures and on the consequently fallacious character of the idea that there is one and only one structure of reality which the enlightened philosopher can see as it truly is, and which he can (at least in principle) describe in logically perfect language – a vision that has obsessed thinkers from Plato to Leibniz, Condillac, Russell and his more faithful followers¹⁸.

It is possible that even those who look at the history of philosophy exclusively through the lens of contemporary philosophical problems may benefit more if the history of philosophy is done for its own sake, because more benefit may come from a true reconstruction of it than from seeing it from the very beginning of historical studies from the perspective of contemporary philosophical problems. The original views, for example of Aristotle, may prove to be more philosophically interesting and fruitful than their doxographical substitutes (i.e. readings of Aristotle through twenty-first century lenses).

5. The difference between questions asked by doxographers and historians

The difference in looking at a view from the past by a historian as Frede understands him and a doxographer interested in the history of philosophy mainly from a philosophical point of view becomes clearer when we look closely at the questions they will be asking. Let's assume that we identified the ancient philosopher's view and the arguments he put forward to support it. The doxographer sees the view as interesting (otherwise he wouldn't bother with it) and he is interested in ancient philosophers' arguments. He will be asking if this view is acceptable, rational and true. Are the justifications adequate and irrefutable? Are there any reasons against this view which were not considered by the ancient philosopher? The historian is interested not in the view itself and its justification that might convince *us* but in the very fact of the existence of such a view and its historical justifications. It is not important for him if the view is true and justified by reasons that are acceptable for *us*, but that this view was acceptable in the times when it was conceived, and also if the arguments given to support it could be perceived then as convincing and perhaps conclusive. The historian, like the doxographer, can treat the belief of Plato, Aristotle and Kepler that stars and planets are rational beings as untrue and uninteresting in the sense that it is not worth contemporary philosophers' and scientists' time to check the truth

¹⁸ I. Berlin, *Against the Current. Essays in the History of Ideas*, London 1997, p. 6.

or falsity of this view. A doxographer would obviously reject this belief and give it no more thought, whereas a historian would straight away become interested in discovering the reasons why these learned men believed in it.

On the other hand, the historian must be very careful in his approach to those views from the past which to us seem to be true, but were not believed then because the arguments given for their support were not acceptable from the point of view of knowledge in the past. Sometimes you have to be able to resist the temptation to discover forerunners of contemporary theories in thinkers who earlier had ideas which after millennia or centuries came to fruition, but who didn't give convincing arguments either from the point of view of their contemporaries or from our point of view. We can't treat either Daedalus and Icarus or Pan Twardowski¹⁹ as forerunners of airspace and cosmic space navigations. After scrutiny of the 'evolutionary' arguments of Empedocles, it is easier to understand and share the Aristotelian critique of them. Likewise, Aristotle's rejection of Plato's creationism is not a sign of his 'modern' way of thinking as we would like to think. Aristotle's reason for depriving God of the role of creator was not a contemporary (scientific) inclination to get rid of the 'hypothesis of God'²⁰ from the theory of the world coming into being, but on the contrary, more platonic than Plato himself, aiming to free God from degrading employment as producer and day-to-day administrator of the world²¹.

6. Internal (philosophical) and external (cultural) standards of acceptance of reasons

Discernment of the standards of a particular epoch helps to make it clear why some views (familiar to us) couldn't be accepted and also why others (improbable for us) were treated as obvious. In different times, philosophical standards have different degrees of autonomy. The decisive influence on them may be that of a different field of the wider culture. In the middle ages, philosophy was under the influence of theology. Nowadays it is under the influence of science. First it was physics, and now biology (evolution and genetic code) and computer science (theories of mind). The dominant cultural

¹⁹ A Polish nobleman and sorcerer from XVI century, who was supposed to have travelled on a cockerel to the Moon.

²⁰ According to a popular anecdote, Laplace, the French scientist, when asked by Napoleon Bonaparte why his theory of the origin of the solar system does not mention God, answered: „Je n'avais pas besoin de cette *hypothèse-là*” (I did not need this hypothesis).

²¹ D. Sedley, *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2007, p. 169.

and intellectual trends are reasons why some questions seem to be sound and relevant – they simply must be asked, whereas others seem to be irrelevant and meaningless. The cultural context precedes discoveries because it decides what is discoverable:

Dominant intellectual commitments have made certain kinds of question appear cogent and given certain kinds of explanation their power to convince, and excluded others. They established, in anticipation of any particular research, the kind of world that was supposed to exist and the appropriate methods of inquiry. Such beliefs, taken from the more general intellectual context of natural science, have regulated the expectations both of questions and of answers, the form of theories and the kinds of explanatory entities taken into them, and the acceptability of the explanations they offered²².

Psychology textbooks provide examples which illustrate some psychological mechanisms at work here: the Necker Cube, pictures that could be seen two ways, such as ‘a rabbit or a duck’, ‘a vase or two profiles’, ‘a young or old woman’ – illustrate how context, previous experience, the dominant attitude at a particular moment, and other similar elements of which the context of our perception consists, control and determine the conceptual picture of the reality which surrounds us. Noticing something as a fact is determined by a theory which is generally accepted and well-rooted in the consciousness of observers:

Physical theories provide patterns within which data appear intelligible. They constitute a ‘conceptual Gestalt’. A theory is not pieced together from observed phenomena, it is rather what makes it possible to observe phenomena as being of a certain sort, and as related to other phenomena²³.

Because facts are perceived and interpreted as meaningful only within accepted theory, there may exist phenomena which are not at all perceptible because they do not have meaning within this theory. Only a change in the theory, a change in the way of looking at the world, will enable observers to perceive these phenomena as meaningful: “until the scientist has learned to see nature in a different way – the new fact is not quite a scientific fact at

²² A.C. Crombie, *Science, Art and Nature in Medieval and Modern Thought*, London 1996, p. 5.

²³ R. Richards, *Theories of Scientific Change*, [in:] *Science and the Quest for Reality*, [in:] A.I. Tauber (ed.), London 1997, p. 210.

all”²⁴. Facts and theories which organize these facts are mutually dependant and form a conceptual unity – a Kuhnian paradigm. According to Kuhn, changing the paradigm is not done by collecting a big enough number of facts thanks to which the present paradigm may be replaced by a better one. Crucial change comes only when there is “a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field’s most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications”²⁵.

7. Conclusions

The aim of my presentation was to consider the reasons for studying the history of philosophy. I concentrated on two different approaches: (1) treating texts of the past great philosophers as a source of inspiration for solving contemporary philosophical problems and (2) studying old texts for their own sake to discover, as far as it is possible, their authorial meanings. Those who choose the first approach should make it clear to their audience that faithfulness to the authorial meanings and intentions has for them only secondary importance at the most. Those choosing the second approach should be aware of a range of factors which, if not taken into account, may distort the original meaning or even make the discovery of it wholly impossible.

Authors who share the methodological outlook of the Cambridge school of history suggest that historians, while working, should keep in mind the following observations²⁶:

- formation of the prevailing world view in the particular epoch depends on many cultural sources. Writings of philosophers of the epoch is only one of them, not necessarily the most important one;

- thinkers of the past talked not to us but to the readers of their time. Discovering who the audience were is essential to discovery of the meaning of their texts;

²⁴ T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago 1970, p. 53.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 85. Kuhn himself recognized the significance of his theory of paradigms to the understanding of the history of philosophy. He commented that “The history of philosophy, as taught within philosophy departments, is often, for example, a parody of the historical. Reading a work of the past, the philosopher regularly seeks the author’s positions on current problems, criticizes them with the aid of current apparatus, and interprets his text to maximize its coherence with modern doctrine. In that process the historic original is often lost”, *Idem*, *The Essential Tension*, Chicago 1977, p. 153.


²⁶ The views of these authors are not identical. However, it was not my aim to dwell on how they differ but rather emphasize the idea of the history of philosophy which they share.

– our social and political life is clearly different from the one known to past philosophers. We should not be looking in their writings for advice as to how to live our lives in circumstances they were not able to imagine;

– the job of the historian is to establish the meaning the authors of the texts intended when communicating their thoughts to the readers of their times, taking into account as many as possible background assumptions the authors did not and did not have to spell out, because they shared them with the audience;

– the historian should be particularly careful not to look in the old texts for material confirming his own moral and political predilections;

– the priority of paradigms in perception refutes the orthodoxy which “insists on the autonomy of the text itself as the sole necessary key to its own meaning”. This orthodoxy prevents understanding of the authorial meaning because of the inevitability of bringing “one’s own expectations about what he [the author] must have been saying”. We have no other way of interpreting new experience (like the reading of an old text) but “in terms of the familiar”. In consequence “our expectations about what someone must be saying or doing will themselves determine that we understand the agent to be doing something which he would not – or even could not – himself have accepted as an account of what he was doing”²⁷.

Remembering the above will enable us to understand the past on its own terms and subsequently “make our conversation with the dead richer and fuller”²⁸. The doxographical tradition looks in the past for its own antecedents and the confirmations of its own beliefs, thus definitely impoverishing the history of ideas and probably the reality of the world. The historical reconstruction of past philosophies offers a diversity of world-views: “The more intellectual history we can get, of the kind which does not worry about what questions are philosophical and who counts as a philosopher, the better our chances of having a suitably large list of [...] interesting thinkers”²⁹. History of philosophy becomes a way of visiting a variety of the worlds which in the past were real and true to their inhabitants. 

²⁷ Q. Skinner, *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*, “History and Theory”, 8 (1969), pp. 3 and 6.

²⁸ R. Rorty, *The Historiography of Philosophy*, p. 73.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

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LESZEK SKOWROŃSKI – dr, jest autorem artykułów na temat współczesnych interpretacji *Etyk* Arystotelesa. Przygotowuje do publikacji książkę *Arystoteles o celu ludzkiego życia*. Zainteresowania: filozofia antyczna, etyka, metodologia historii filozofii, filozofia polityczna.

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