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9 The Relationship between Philosophy and its History

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There is nowadays a widespread consensus that, whilst some philosophical enquiry is historical and some is not, advocates of the two approaches can work together harmoniously. Writing in 2005, Gary Hatfield observed that contextually oriented historians of philosophy no longer needed to worry about being marginalised, and had no reason to complain of ‘a lack of appreciation from ahistorical colleagues’.¹ More recently, Christia Mercer has argued that historians of philosophy should avoid wasting their energies on internal squabbles about method. It is now widely accepted, she claims, that the quality of philosophical work ‘has less to do with any specific method we use and more to do with the proper fit between the projects we select for study and the skills we apply to them’.²

These ecumenical reassurances aim to forge a symbiosis between philosophy and its history, and largely reflect the status quo; but, despite their wish to rise above disagreements that might sully the relationship between historically and ahistorically minded philosophers, disagreement has not entirely disappeared. Some hostility remains, and continues to generate a degree of suspicion. One of the clearest manifestations of this mistrust is what I shall call the Separation Thesis: the view that the study of philosophy and the study of its history are distinct forms of enquiry. This position has a number of active advocates. In Timothy Williamson’s estimation, for example, a historian of philosophy puts forward an account of ‘what some philosopher held’, while philosophy consists in ‘putting a theory forward as true’.³ Or, as Michael Huemer provocatively contends, historians who interpret texts tell us ‘what

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¹ Hatfield 2005, pp. 88–9.

² Mercer 2019, p. 530.

³ Williamson 2018, p. 99.

philosopher P meant by utterance U', but 'this is of no philosophical import', because we still do not know whether P's claim is true.⁴ Defenders of the Separation Thesis are thus an exception to the ecumenical rule. Rather than accepting that one can do philosophy historically, they view the history of philosophy as an appendage. Rather than embracing a historical approach, they isolate philosophy from its past.

The claim that there is just one thing philosophers do, namely putting forward theories as true, and just one thing that lies within the purview of the history of philosophy, namely telling us what past philosophers have said, will undoubtedly amaze a great many recent and contemporary practitioners, historically minded or not.⁵ Where is the exploration of alien points of view, or the development of two sides of a case, that are part and parcel of philosophical investigation? Where is the critical reflection on canon formation or the interpretation and assessment of reasons that are integral to studying the subject? To uphold a bare distinction between affirmation and reportage, these and many other aspects of philosophical creativity have to be suppressed. Yet, according to Williamson, historians of philosophy must respect the boundaries he lays down for them. Reporting what earlier thinkers have said possesses some value, and is even 'part of philosophy'; but although historians are free to dig around in the past, they must not delude themselves into believing that they are contributing to philosophy proper. The fruits of their research are no more than a series of footnotes, which rarely if ever advance the subject. Few modern developments, Williamson claims, 'have been directly inspired by much earlier work. Even when older precedents were clear in retrospect, the new ideas often had to be discovered independently before the similarity was realised.'⁶ Even where past thinkers anticipated our philosophical ideas, we can reach their conclusions for ourselves without drawing on their arguments. It is therefore not essential to examine them.

The Separation Thesis seeks to legitimise a certain view of philosophical authority. The only way to make a contribution to the subject, its supporters claim, is to affirm philosophical truths in your own voice, and this is the criterion by which philosophers should be judged: 'the test of a good major is that s/he does good philosophy, not good history of philosophy'.⁷ Underlying this view there is also, perhaps, a resentful suspicion, mischievously voiced by Huemer, that philosophising in

⁴ Huemer 2020.

⁵ See, e.g., Rorty 1984.

⁶ Williamson 2018, p. 109.

⁷ Scriven 1977, p. 233.

this fashion is more difficult than doing historical research, and deserves greater respect. 'If you're a historian ... you're not arguing that any philosophical thesis is *true*. You're just saying that some philosophical thesis is *supported by the texts*. That makes life simpler and easier.'⁸ It is not hard to see how this ordering of significance and skill embodies a bid for status. By marginalising the history of philosophy, the Separation Thesis elevates research that answers to a particular conception of what philosophy is, and endows people who do this kind of work with philosophical authority.

Since these aspects of the Separation Thesis open it to the charges of arrogance and dogmatism, it is not particularly surprising that it has relatively few committed advocates. Why, then, should we bother to discuss it? Why worry about an extreme and combative position that can only stir up trouble? In many contexts the Separation Thesis is probably best ignored; but in relation to our present purposes it remains significant, because it continues to shape our understanding of the relationship between philosophy and history, and fuels some of the residual disagreement that surrounds it. If we want to understand why this relationship remains somewhat uneasy, and deepen our understanding of what the uneasiness is about, we cannot simply set the Separation Thesis aside. On the contrary, we need to interrogate it. In the next section I identify three ways in which the Separation Thesis continues to haunt contemporary discussions of the relation between philosophy and its history. However, if we only concentrate on its current effects, I go on to suggest, the grounds of its influence remain obscure and we cannot adequately explain why it remains a force to be reckoned with. To address this question, I argue in the third section, we need to take a historical approach to the Separation Thesis itself. By considering how philosophy has traditionally set itself apart from history, we can get a fuller sense of what drives contemporary philosophers to defend the Separation Thesis, and what they hope to gain by doing so. I conclude by arguing that the Separation Thesis enacts a fantasy about philosophy's unique and transformative power, and answers to some of our deepest desires. To acknowledge the interdependence of philosophy and history we need to set this fantasy aside; but before we can do so we must examine it.

Many of the methodological issues that absorb historians of philosophy are internal to their practice. When, for example, should one study the genealogy of concepts, reconstruct the arguments of individual texts or trace their reception? What can we learn by examining the conditions in which people are prepared to fight for a philosophical doctrine, or the

⁸ Huemer 2020.

circumstances in which systems of ideas become tools of oppression? Immersed in questions such as these, researchers rarely pause to consider why the history of philosophy as such is worth studying. Confident of its value, and operating within a historical frame of reference, they focus on the problems to which it gives rise. Asked to explain what their work contributes to non-historical forms of philosophy, these historians often adopt a defensive posture. Shifting onto the back foot, they take it on themselves to show that at least part of what makes their research valuable is its contribution to our understanding of contemporary philosophical issues. Contrary to the claim made by the Separation Thesis, they argue, the history of philosophy is not distinct from, or subordinate to, its ahistorical counterpart. Quite the opposite, it plays a role in the putting forward of philosophical truths.⁹

In following out this line of argument, historians largely accept the Separation Thesis on its own terms. Much as they oppose its attitude to history, they bow to its assumption that it falls to them to justify their activities in terms their non-historical colleagues can accept, rather than the other way around. Taking on the burden of self-legitimation, they set out to show how the history of philosophy enriches philosophy proper. This is a powerful approach to take. As an extensive literature demonstrates, there are many ways in which historians can advance ongoing philosophical debates. But not all historians find this response to separatism satisfying. As some of them object, it already concedes too much to the Separation Thesis, and in doing so loses sight of the real reasons for studying the history of philosophy. Reconstructing the meaning of texts is not, as the Separation Thesis claims and some conciliatory historians seem to allow, a subordinate task allocated to philosophy's historical handmaidens; on the contrary, it is undertaking in its own right. Furthermore, it embodies its own standards of success, which cannot be assimilated to the norms governing the assessment of philosophical truths. If we try to evaluate the history of philosophy in the terms laid down by the Separation Thesis, we are bound to sell it short. Better, then, to embrace the separatist view that philosophy and the history of philosophy are different projects, and agree that the history of philosophy aims to interpret what past philosophers have said.¹⁰

The attempt to face down the separatist implication that the history of philosophy is not only different from, but subordinate to, philosophy proper has obvious polemical force. Given that it would be regarded as unreasonable to expect contemporary epistemologists, for example, to

⁹ Yolton 1986; Curley 1986; Antognazza 2015.

¹⁰ Garber 2005; Laerke 2013.

conduct their research in such a way as to promote historical enquiry, 'why', Mogens Laerke asks, 'should the reverse be the case?'¹¹ But the strategy is also costly. While it releases historians from the subordinate position to which the Separation Thesis consigns them, it simultaneously cuts them off from the philosophical practice of assessing positions for their truth or falsehood, and for many historians this is too high a price to pay. As one can see from their continuing efforts to show that their research contributes to the process of articulating truths, they are not ready to exclude themselves from philosophising as separatists construe it.

I now turn to two further attempts to engage with the Separation Thesis, one of which focuses on its tendency towards conservatism, the other on its unduly narrow conception of philosophical enquiry. When challenging the Separation Thesis, historians of philosophy regularly argue that philosophers need to draw on the ideas of historical figures to form and test hypotheses.¹² Without knowing what positions earlier authors have taken and how they have defended them, contemporary thinkers run the risk of overlooking objections to their own proposals, reinventing the wheel, or attacking straw men. By way of reply, a separatist might argue that philosophers are only contingently dependent on history, since the past is not their only source of potential counter-arguments and objections; they can also draw on their intuitions – that is to say, on their existing beliefs – to assess the truth of a claim, and adjust their positions in the light of thought experiments. By imagining a range of hypothetical scenarios, for example, one can exclude claims with implausible implications; and the method of reflective equilibrium provides a means to test one intuition against another.

Michael Della Rocca has recently described these appeals to intuition as attempts to tame philosophy.¹³ Why, he asks, should we assume that beliefs we find intuitively acceptable are more likely to be true than those we find counter-intuitive? Why should we exclude possibilities that are at odds with, and might revolutionise, our current outlook? In the course of this critique Della Rocca also points out that a commitment to saving our intuitions has implications for the history of philosophy. It shapes a philosopher's approach to history by directing their attention away from historical ideas they happen to find unconvincing. Rather than looking to the wild side of history for challenges that might alter their thinking, they will tend to appeal to the past to shore up their existing beliefs.

¹¹ Laerke 2013, p. 9.

¹² Cottingham 2005; Wilson 2005.

¹³ Della Rocca 2013, p. 187.

Although he does not put it this way, Della Rocca's analysis serves as a further illustration of the continuing influence of the Separation Thesis. Advocates of the intuitive approach defend a form of philosophising that purportedly has nothing substantial to learn from the past. Our existing beliefs supplant the need to seriously engage with historical points of view that do not already strike us as convincing; and to find out what questions are of philosophical interest, it is enough to study the prevailing practice of the subject. Philosophers can therefore rely on non-historical resources. Although an issue may have been discussed for thousands of years, our present knowledge and powers of reasoning give us our best means of assessing its truth. Any contribution that the history of philosophy may make to this self-contained form of philosophising is non-essential, and can be set aside.

The dependence on intuition that Della Rocca criticises points to one limitation of the Separation Thesis: by excluding historical work from the realm of properly philosophical activity, and favouring intuition as a means of testing philosophical claims, the thesis narrows the horizons of philosophical investigation. But a further accusation of narrowness comes from critics who voice a different objection: that the Separation Thesis arbitrarily limits the range of questions that count as philosophical. Even if separatists are right to claim that some philosophical problems can be addressed in non-historical terms, there are other problems, including a number of reflexive issues about philosophy itself, that demand historical treatment. For example, to address the question 'What is philosophy?' we need to consider what philosophy has been. To find out whether any philosophical questions are eternal we need to examine the ruptures that have occurred within the philosophical tradition. In short, we need to adopt a historical approach.¹⁴

A possible reply might be that questions such as these are not after all philosophical. But it is hard to see how this could be more than a stipulation. Once issues about the character of philosophy as a practice are acknowledged to be integral to the study of the subject, the Separation Thesis emerges as one view among others. It offers an account of what philosophy does and where its limits lie. But what of the contrasting Nietzschean proposal that philosophy proceeds genealogically as the repressed seek to discredit the ideologies of those who dominate them?¹⁵ What of the view that philosophy, like science, hangs onto faltering paradigms long after the available evidence has ceased to support

¹⁴ Vermeir 2013, p. 54.

¹⁵ Nietzsche 1994.

them.¹⁶ What of the view that philosophy is more malleable than either of these models implies, and changes in response to a broad array of cultural pressures? In order to treat any of these proposals as subjects of philosophical investigation one must abandon the separatist view that truly philosophical research does not encompass historical enquiry into philosophy's past.

The criticisms of the Separation Thesis that I have offered seem to me to hit their mark. One might therefore expect some concessions from the separatist side. But as far as I am aware, none have been forthcoming. Why should this be? While the refusal to give way might merely be the fruit of philosophical obstinacy, I believe it has a more interesting explanation. Even when the Separation Thesis is put under the pressures we have so far charted, its advocates are not willing to abandon it. Something else about it, which the criticisms do not touch, continues to strike them as importantly right, and sustains their commitment to it. To get a deeper appreciation of the separatist's hostility to history we need to try to understand what this is, and in the remainder of the chapter I offer a hypothesis. To grasp what is at stake, I shall argue, we need to take a historical approach to the Separation Thesis itself and consider how, historically speaking, philosophy has differentiated itself from history.

When advocates of the Separation Thesis claim that philosophers put forward theories as true, they have a particular kind of truth in mind. Lepidopterists, after all, put forward truths about butterflies. The distinctive feature of philosophy, as Williamson sees it, is that it aims to answer 'questions of stupendous generality'.¹⁷ It is often far from obvious how contemporary philosophical research answers to this description – many of the issues it addresses are extremely specific. But the view that philosophy deals in general problems remains a commonplace, and derives its authority, I shall suggest, from the history of the subject. For all that writers such as Williamson aim to dissociate philosophy from its history, that very history inflects their conception of what philosophy is.

The claim that philosophical truths are distinguished by their generality is rooted in the classical view that philosophy aspires to comprehend Being in its entirety. Since the truths it aims to uncover apply to all beings, they are universal rather than particular; and because they capture the unchanging essences of things, they are eternal rather than temporal. These features are held to distinguish philosophy, which alone deals in knowledge that is entirely general, from other forms of enquiry. At the same time, however, other features of philosophy add

¹⁶ Kuhn 1962; Rorty 1979, pp. 322–56.

¹⁷ Williamson 2018, p. 5.

to its distinctive character. To gain philosophical understanding one must employ specific methods, usually described as forms of reasoning, which deliver an indefeasible and compelling kind of knowledge that can in turn be used to assess knowledge of other kinds. Alongside these epistemological traits, philosophising also has a theological aspect; as we grasp philosophical truths, we come to share some of God's knowledge, and in doing so participate in the divine. To some extent, our understanding of the elements and structure of Being mirrors that of God. Finally, this process transforms us. As Socrates intimates in the *Timaeus*, the more philosophers immerse themselves in knowledge of the eternal, feel its force and live as it dictates, the more joyful they become.¹⁸ The contemplation and enactment of philosophical truth generates intense and enduring happiness, and constitutes the greatest perfection of which human beings are capable.

This ancient conception of philosophy as a form of understanding unlike any other reappears throughout the history of the subject. In some of its reincarnations the four aspects we have identified are all reaffirmed, and philosophy is again represented as the transformative route to a quasi-divine and supremely joyful way of life. In others, priority is given to one or other aspect, as Williamson gives priority to the generality of philosophical truths. Even then, however, the other traits continue to hover in the wings, posing questions of their own. What is it like to comprehend truths of stupendous generality? What intellectual or practical skills does it require? And how does it change our lives? Each aspect of the view I have outlined, which I shall call the Classical Conception, continues to resonate more or less audibly, even as new metaphysical and moral outlooks inform successive accounts of philosophical enquiry.

To trace the Classical Conception from the ancient world to the present would be to write an entire history of philosophy, and is far beyond the scope of a single chapter. To illustrate the way this conception has endured, and show how it has continued to legitimise the separation of philosophy and history, I shall focus on a single example. Early modern philosophers were, as Aaron Garrett points out, 'extremely (and sometimes overtly) eclectic'. They were 'acutely aware that they were not ancients, at the same time that they appropriated from the ancient schools'.¹⁹ Thanks in part to the work of Pierre Hadot²⁰ and Michel Foucault,²¹ we are alert to the extent to which authors writing during

¹⁸ Sedley 1999, p. 312; Plato 1965, *Timaeus* 90b–c.

¹⁹ Garrett 2013, p. 232.

²⁰ Hadot 1995.

²¹ Foucault 1997.

this period continue to advocate an ancient view of philosophy as an art of living, a form of knowledge manifested in a harmonious way of life. Whilst many early modern thinkers defend versions of this stance, one of its clearest exponents is Spinoza, who blends a strong commitment to the Classical Conception with a revolutionary philosophical system. Spinoza's metaphysics and his resulting ideal of human liberation do not align precisely with the claims of any of his predecessors; but taken as a whole, his philosophical vision reaffirms the Classical Conception of philosophy and provides a basis for distinguishing philosophy from history.

Spinoza organises his conception of philosophical knowledge around a distinction between imagining and reasoning. Rather than working with the confused ideas we derive from imagination, that is to say, from our everyday experience, philosophical enquirers reason their way to adequate ideas of the essential natures of things. At one level of generality they grasp the natures of particular types of things such as bodies or minds, and at a still higher level they come to understand the nature of an individual thing as such.²² By reasoning, they come to understand the universal truth that the essence of an individual thing is its power to persevere in its being or go on existing as the individual it is. At the same time, reasoning as Spinoza portrays it alerts philosophers to a contrast between the temporal features of an individual and its unchanging essence. In our day-to-day lives we take it that individuals come into being and endure for a certain length of time; but, once reasoning allows us to 'perceive things under a certain species of eternity',²³ we view them in a different light. Not only are the natures or essences of individual things eternal; it is also an eternal or atemporal truth that the essence of an individual thing is its power to persevere in its being.

We find here the first two features of the Classical Conception of philosophy: by reasoning, philosophers can arrive at an understanding of universal and eternal truths. With these conclusions in hand, Spinoza goes on to embrace the conception's two remaining features. First, rational understanding makes us joyful. As our philosophical knowledge of the essential natures of things extends, we become better able to judge what is good for us and what we can achieve. Guided by these insights, we become less prone to act self-destructively, and take pleasure in our resilience. The more we develop ways of life that enable us to live in the light of our knowledge, the happier we become. Finally, as Spinoza continually stresses, philosophy has a theological dimension. As our understanding advances, its focus shifts from the natures of

²² Spinoza 1985a, IIp40s2.

²³ Spinoza 1985a, EIIp44 Corr.2.

individual things to their ultimate dependence on the single substance that Spinoza calls God or nature.²⁴ At this level of abstraction we know individual things through their place in the natural order. In the words of the *Ethics*, ‘the more we understand singular things, the more we understand God’²⁵ and experience ‘the greatest satisfaction of mind that there can be’.²⁶ In its highest reaches, then, philosophising enables us to see beyond the temporal features of things to their universal and unchanging natures. In doing so, it increases our understanding of our place in nature and empowers us to live more joyfully. During the earlier stages of this process many of the changes we undergo reflect our existing desires. But the radical transformation of outlook that Spinoza envisages at the end of the *Ethics* is harder to imagine. Focusing on the nature of God alters us in ways that are beyond our current comprehension. A distinctive feature of philosophy is therefore its power to transform almost out of recognition what we know, what we value and what we are.

By situating the separatist assertion that philosophy puts forward general claims as true in the broader context of the Classical Conception, we have perhaps made it easier to see what gives the Separation Thesis its appeal. Part of its attraction derives from its place in an enduring and ambitious account of what philosophy can achieve. However, it is still not clear why philosophy, thus understood, should exclude historical research, and here again the Classical Conception can help us. When authors such as Spinoza delineate this conception, they explain what philosophy is. At the same time, however, they define the boundaries that set it apart from other kinds of enquiry. Philosophy’s capacity to make general truths intelligible, to unite us with God and to generate supreme happiness is, as they see it, not shared by other subjects, which are consequently excluded from the philosophical realm. To put it another way, the Classical Conception incorporates a series of Separation Theses, of which the divide between philosophy and history is one.

Perhaps the most persistently contested of the boundaries around philosophy is the one dividing it from poetry – the boundary between the generalising mode of thought that characterises philosophical reflection and the mimetic practices of poetic imagination. Where philosophical truths are the fruit of reasoning, poetry draws on the imagination to create images, metaphors and personifications. The relationship between the two is widely acknowledged to be close; according to Aristotle, for

²⁴ Spinoza 1985a, Vp29s.

²⁵ Spinoza 1985a, Vp24.

²⁶ Spinoza 1985a, Vp27.

example, poetry imagines what philosophy then goes on to understand. But whether they can remain distinct is not so clear. Perhaps, as Aristotle seems to suggest, a philosopher who initially depends on poetic devices to imagine the liberating force of philosophical understanding can eventually leave them behind; or perhaps, as Plato's representation of Socrates intimates, the two are so intertwined that philosophy can never free itself from its dependence upon poetry, and is not autonomous after all. On the one hand, Socrates condemns poetry for dragging us downwards, away from the world of Forms. On the other hand, he appeals to myths and narratives to convey the pleasures of philosophical knowledge. The underlying worry, as Stephen Halliwell argues, is that, while poetry can convey the beauty of rational understanding, philosophy cannot capture it by means of discursive reasoning.²⁷ Only with poetic support can it generate the intense joyfulness that is a hallmark of the Classical Conception.

In an early modern context this challenge to separatism is expressed in Philip Sidney's claim that poetry, rather than philosophy, is the monarch of the sciences.²⁸ Unless philosophical arguments are 'illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of poesy',²⁹ their truths 'lie dark before the imaginative and judging power' and are incapable of moving us either to reason further or to act on our rational understanding.³⁰ Without 'the images of virtues, vices and what else, with that delightful teaching that must be the right describing note to know a poet by' there can be no successful philosophising.³¹ In short, philosophy as the Classical Conception defines it cannot manage without imagination in the form of poetry.

Plato's Socrates is not alone in entertaining this suspicion. We also find it in Spinoza, who, rather than spelling out the content of philosophical understanding, personifies the transformation it brings about in an image or exemplar of the free man. To illuminate the benefits of philosophising, the *Ethics* describes the outstanding powers that flow from the free man's understanding, and encourages us to imagine what it would be like to possess them.³² By thinking ahead to what we might become, identifying with the free man's powers, and doing our best to imitate them, we strengthen our sense of what understanding can achieve and motivate ourselves to go on philosophising.

²⁷ Halliwell 2011, p. 106.

²⁸ Sidney 1952, p. 124.

²⁹ Sidney 1952, p. 115.

³⁰ Sidney 1952, p. 119.

³¹ Sidney 1952, p. 116.

³² Spinoza 1985a, Vp27.

Spinoza does not draw attention to this poetic dimension of philosophical practice, or acknowledge it as problematic. Commentators are divided between the view that, like Aristotle, he sees it as a temporary support from which philosophers can eventually break free, and the view that he takes poetry and philosophy to be inextricably intertwined. On either reading, the tension between the imaginative and rational aspects of his analysis of philosophising illustrates the general problem with which we are concerned: the uneasy relationship between philosophy and other forms of enquiry. In the case of poetry, it suggests, separatism may not be an easy position to defend. Despite the allure of the Classical Conception, the aspiration to represent philosophy as an autonomous practice is difficult to sustain.

A comparable challenge besets the boundary between philosophy and history. As we have seen, contemporary separatists claim that studying the history of philosophy is distinct from studying philosophy, and are unimpressed by historians' objections to their view. However, once we situate their position in the context of the Classical Conception, we get a clearer sense of what they are excluding. According to Aristotle, both history and philosophy aim at truth; but whereas history tries to capture truths about particular types of phenomena, philosophical truths are general. The Classical Conception agrees: since philosophical truths are truths of the utmost generality, philosophy is not fundamentally concerned with truths about particulars. That is to say, it is not concerned with the very truths that are traditionally identified as historical. History is therefore separate from philosophy.

This contrast continues to echo through early modern debate. We find it, for example, in the *Advancement of Learning*, where Francis Bacon distinguishes several types of history, each concerned with particular things or events. Chronicles, lives and narrations deal with 'a time, or a person, or an action',³³ natural histories are about creatures, marvels or arts, and mechanical histories focus on manual arts and artefacts.³⁴ Whereas philosophy moves from universal principles to general conclusions, historians build up inductively grounded knowledge of their subject matter, based on their experience of particulars.

Spinoza was deeply critical of many aspects of Bacon's philosophy, as he explained in a letter to Henry Oldenburg.³⁵ But he shared Bacon's view of history. Whether one is trying to write a history of nature or Scripture, his *Theological-Political Treatise* affirms, one must derive one's

³³ Bacon 1996, p. 179.

³⁴ Bacon 1996, pp. 176–7.

³⁵ Spinoza 1985b, p. 167.

conclusions from a systematic study of the particular phenomena concerned. Natural historians, for example, infer definitions of natural things from the data at their disposal, while historians of Scripture ground their interpretations of the text on a comprehensive study of its particular features including the language in which it is written and the meanings of individual words.³⁶ Thus far, Spinoza's conception of the difference between philosophy and history is consonant with the Classical Conception and the boundary it implies. While philosophical reasoning yields knowledge of the eternal natures of things, historians infer conclusions of limited generality from the particular ideas they have acquired through experience. Furthermore, the fact that historical investigations are rooted in time and place prevents them from illuminating the unchanging nature of God, and cuts them off from the supreme joyfulness that comes with philosophical understanding. History and philosophy are distinct.

As in the case of poetry, however, this official view does not go unquestioned. Even an author such as Spinoza, who is largely sympathetic to the Classical Conception, allows that philosophy is dependent on history and concedes that the boundary between them is porous. To be sure, he envisages a kind of understanding that transcends particulars; but he also recognises that, in the process of acquiring it, philosophers draw on their knowledge of individual things. As our experience grows, we gradually refine our inadequate ideas of the world around us into a richer and more reliable vision, and generate the concepts on which some of our most fundamental insights are grounded. By this means, for example, we can arrive at the ideas of motion and rest that are the basis of physics.³⁷ In addition to adopting a synthetic method and working from the universal to the particular, philosophers also need to take an analytic or historical approach and work in the other direction. To put the point another way, history plays a part in the acquisition of philosophical knowledge.

As before, some commentators hold that historical enquiry functions for Spinoza as a form of scaffolding. It allows philosophers to reach a certain level of insight, but as they immerse themselves in rational and intuitive knowledge they cease to depend on it. This is partly because the balance of their thinking tips away from the historical and they become increasingly preoccupied with universal ideas.³⁸ But it is also because, as philosophers reflect on the general ideas they have derived from experience, they recognise them as universal ideas of the eternal natures of things. Their historical grasp of these ideas become philosophical. This

³⁶ Spinoza 2016, p. 171.

³⁷ Spinoza 2016, p. 176.

³⁸ Spinoza 1985a, EVp20s5.

is a puzzling transition, and Spinoza does not say much about it. On one interpretation, the historical process through which an idea was reached is entirely superseded when its universal nature becomes clear. On another interpretation, however, the history of an idea is carried along with it, so that even our most purely philosophical ideas of the natures of things bear traces of the historical processes by which they were formed. On this account, history penetrates so deeply into philosophical understanding that the autonomy of philosophy is undermined.

Spinoza's analysis of the relationships between philosophy, poetry and history implicitly concedes that philosophy may be more dependent on the other two than the Classical Conception allows. Poetry challenges the presumption that purely philosophical understanding is motivating, and competes with it as a source of joyfulness. History, meanwhile, challenges philosophy's claim to be the unique route to knowledge of the universal natures of things. Increasingly, philosophy emerges as part of a cooperative intellectual undertaking in which all three play a part. Spinoza refuses to risk the supremacy of philosophical enquiry by openly acknowledging that it is inherently historical, and the image of understanding in which the *Ethics* culminates sets particularity aside. Nevertheless, the tension between his two accounts of philosophical knowledge as both unified with and distinct from its historical counterpart suggests that unqualified defences of the Separation Thesis may involve an element of denial. To maintain a firm and impermeable boundary between philosophy and history, one may have to ignore or suppress the extent to which philosophical understanding is concerned with the historical, that is to say with the inductively based study of particular things.

In the preceding section I identified a historical strand of philosophical thinking about philosophy itself. The Classical Conception, I proposed, runs through the philosophical tradition and informs debate about what philosophy is. Contested though it has always been, it defends a vision of philosophy as an autonomous enquiry, firmly separated from history and able to proceed without historical support. It is clear from the examples I have discussed that this outlook remained influential in the early modern era, where it underwrote an ambitious vision of what philosophy could and should aspire to achieve. But the idea that it might continue to define our current understanding of philosophy and cast light on recent or contemporary forms of separatism may seem absurd.³⁹ According to Hadot, for example, philosophy has long since ceased to be a potentially transformative practice and has become a type of discourse – an enquiry

³⁹ Thomasson 2017.

into truths that, even when they are truths about human life, are meant to inform us rather than alter the way we live.⁴⁰ Nowadays, it might seem, the Classical Conception of philosophy has itself been transformed and has become irrelevant.

Hadot's diagnosis arguably fails to do justice to a revival of interest in philosophising as a way of life, for which his own work is partly responsible.⁴¹ All the same, there is no doubt that, particularly within the analytic tradition, the pursuit of philosophical knowledge is on the whole no longer regarded as a way to transform ourselves. With some exceptions, it does not aim to unite us with God or generate unparalleled joyfulness.⁴² At certain points in its history, however, analytic philosophy has continued to echo some of the Classical Conception's defining commitments. Writing in 1914, for example, Bertrand Russell argued that philosophical propositions 'must be applicable to everything that exists or may exist' and 'are concerned with properties of things that are true in every possible world, independently of facts that can only be discovered by our senses'.⁴³ In line with the Classical Conception, one of the defining features of philosophical truths is their universality. In addition, they are independent of the particular facts we derive from experience and thus of historical knowledge. 'Too often', Russell continues, 'we find in philosophical books arguments based on the course of history, or the convolutions of the brain, or the eyes of shellfish. Special and accidental facts of this kind are irrelevant to philosophy, which must make only such assertions as would be equally true, however the actual world were constituted.'⁴⁴

Like other defenders of the Classical Conception, Russell here insists that philosophy is distinct from history. At the same time, he also upholds the boundary between philosophy and poetry. Philosophy, he contends, is indistinguishable from logic. It provides 'an inventory of abstractly tenable hypotheses',⁴⁵ a definitive dissection of propositions that would set out clearly all their connections and remove all possibilities of misunderstanding. By abandoning natural language and mapping the world in logical terms, Russell's atomism not only aspired to eradicate the linguistic ambiguity on which poetry thrives, but set out to remove philosophy's dependence on imagination. Rather than relying on images or

⁴⁰ Hadot 1995, pp. 20–1.

⁴¹ Nehamas 1998; Sellars 2013; Tanesini 2017.

⁴² Jantzen 1998.

⁴³ Russell 1963 [1914], p. 84.

⁴⁴ Russell 1963 [1914], p. 84.

⁴⁵ Russell 1963 [1914], p. 85.

exemplars, it presented itself as utterly transparent to reason. Perhaps surprisingly, then, some of the most formative analytic interpretations of philosophy have been shaped by the Classical Conception; and as we saw at the beginning of the chapter, this legacy has not entirely disappeared. Whether or not its exponents are fully aware of it, contemporary defences of the Separation Thesis are indebted to the Classical Conception and reiterate some of its defining commitments.

When philosophers such as Plato or Spinoza portray the joyful and empowering understanding to which philosophising gives rise, they are surely seeking, among other things, to assuage a desire. By dividing philosophy from history they release themselves from a messy domain of particular facts into an orderly realm of general truths. Putting aside the frustrations that arise from the incompleteness of experience and the endless proliferation of counter-examples, they cultivate a reassuringly secure form of knowledge that grows step by step. Breaking free of the finite human imagination, they encounter the world and themselves as they fundamentally are. Even if one does not share these aspirations, it is hard to be entirely deaf to their appeal. They answer to an intelligible longing to achieve what Thomas Nagel calls the view from nowhere, and grasp the whole of Being in its unchanging entirety.⁴⁶ They hold out the prospect of a superhuman power to live in the light of truth and free oneself from sadness.⁴⁷

Contemporary separatists would almost certainly dismiss this image as a fantasy. Like the great majority of philosophers nowadays, they would view it as an imaginative projection of real but unrealisable desires. It is arguable, however, that traces of these desires explain their continuing commitments. The determination to elevate philosophical truth to a level of 'stupendous generality' manifests an anxiety about our human finitude that is integral to the Classical Conception and brings with it the wish for a philosophy divided from the particular. To concede that philosophical investigation is part of history in the sense that its conclusions reflect the cultural limitations of time and place and fall short of complete universality would be to give up the hope of this transcendental form of knowledge and settle for a more mundane conception of philosophical practice. Unwilling as they may be to avow a desire for transcendence – indeed, much as they may reject it – separatist philosophers continue to yearn for it. Endowing philosophy with autonomy and an outstanding form of power remains important to them and is reflected in the way they characterise their own activity.

⁴⁶ Nagel 1986.

⁴⁷ Lloyd 1984; Lloyd 1993.

I began by proposing that, despite a widespread pluralism, the place of history of philosophy within philosophical enquiry remains uneasy. As the debate between separatists and their opponents shows, the history of philosophy is and is not regarded as fully philosophical. One reason for this, I have suggested, is the continuing influence of the Classical Conception of philosophy, together with the desires it expresses. To render philosophy and history entirely harmonious, we need to recognise the view of philosophy that the Classical Conception defends for the fantasy that it is. We cannot transcend the historical traditions that have given us our contested conceptions of philosophy, and our philosophising must take them into account.

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