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# The Sense of the Past

ESSAYS IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

*Bernard Williams*

Edited and with an introduction by Myles Burnyeat

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## Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy

Discussing, some years ago, different ways of approaching the thought of Descartes, I made a broad distinction between two activities that I labelled ‘the history of ideas’ and ‘the history of philosophy’.<sup>1</sup> The two are distinguished in the first place by their product. The history of ideas yields something that is history before it is philosophy, while with the history of philosophy it is the other way round. In particular, the product of the history of philosophy, being in the first place philosophy, admits more systematic regimentation of the thought under discussion. The two activities can be distinguished also by having rather different directions of attention. **The history of ideas, as I intended the distinction, naturally looks sideways to the context of a philosopher’s ideas, in order to realize what their author might be doing in making those assertions in that situation. The history of philosophy, on the other hand, is more concerned to relate a philosopher’s conception to present problems, and is likely to look at his influence on the course of philosophy from his time to the present.**

It is obvious that these two activities cannot be totally separated from one another, and each needs to some extent the skills of the other. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the distinction is simply baseless, or that the best possible historical approach to a philosopher would consist in an ideal fusion of these two activities. There is more than one reason why this cannot be so. **One is that the best possible history of ideas is likely to show that the philosophy did not in fact mean in contemporary terms what subsequent philosophy has most made of it.** But, apart from that, the kinds of sensibility needed for the two activities are bound to yield partly incompatible products, in rather the way that Impressionism, by exploring as intensely as possible the surface effects of light, was thereby debarred from giving as much information about structure as was accessible to some other styles of painting.

I have said that the approach associated with what I called ‘the history of philosophy’ is marked out both by a concern that its product should be in good part philosophy, and also by an interest in diachronic influence (a dimension which the phrase itself, of course, particularly sug-

<sup>1</sup> B. Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, preface.

gests). It is important, however, that these two points do not simply, or always easily, go together. One way of putting the philosophy of the past to use in present terms is to neglect or overlook, to some extent, the history that lies between that philosophy and the present day, and to reconsider the philosophy in partial independence from its actual influence. It has been a particular speciality, in fact, of the analytic history of philosophy to approach the philosophy of the past in this way. At its extreme, this activity could take the form of triumphant anachronism, as when it used to be said, in the heyday of analytic confidence, that we should approach the works of Plato as though they had appeared in last month's issue of *Mind*. The claim that it did actually proceed in this way is now one of the standard charges associated with the demonized image of an analytical history of philosophy.

Other charges against analytical history of philosophy are that it suffers from the limitations of analytic philosophy itself, in considering only a narrow range of philosophical interests; and that it neglects the literary dimension of philosophical works, so that—in the case of some of them, at least—it misses a good deal of what can be got from them even philosophically. Finally, there is the charge of its obtrusive cockiness, the condescension with which earlier writers are treated to instruction by current philosophical methods, and are reprov'd for their errors—errors to which they have been committed, typically, by the way in which analytical philosophy interprets them. All these charges are certainly true, in the sense that there are very many works in this style to which one or more, and often all, of the charges can justly be applied. I shall not discuss all the charges here.<sup>2</sup>

The first of the charges, however (and, to some extent, the last), raises the question not only of how such activities should be conducted, but of why. **The idea of treating philosophical writings from the past as though they were contemporary is, at the limit, simply unintelligible.** If one abstracts entirely from their history—including in this both the history of their context and the history of their influence—one has an obvious problem of what object one is even supposed to be considering. One seems to be left simply with a set of words in some modern language (which, in many cases, have been generated by a translator), and **one associates with these words whatever philosophical notions they may carry with them today.** This activity has no title to being history of any sort. But even when the activity is less arbitrary than this suggests, there remains a question of its point. The point of any history, one might suppose, is to achieve some distance from the present, which can help one to understand the present.

<sup>2</sup> I have said something about the literary character of some philosophical works in B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 13–14.

The more extreme forms of analytical history of philosophy addressed themselves to removing that distance altogether, and in doing so lost the title to being any pointful form of historical activity. In these extreme forms, they owed their existence only to the fact that something called ‘the history of philosophy’ appeared in the syllabus, and they provided a philosophical activity to fill this place.

However it may have been in earlier years, these very extreme forms of the analytical history of philosophy do now belong to the demonology of the subject, and are rarely to be found in inhabited places in the daylight. There is a good deal of history of philosophy that uses analytical techniques, and yet is genuinely and non-arbitrarily historical; it is still history of philosophy in my terms, which is to say that its product is to an important extent philosophy. **To justify its existence, it must maintain a historical distance from the present, and it must do this in terms that sustain its identity as philosophy. It is just to this extent that it can indeed be useful, because it is just to this extent that it can help us to deploy ideas of the past in order to understand our own.** We can adapt to the history of philosophy a remark that Nietzsche made about classical philology: ‘I cannot imagine what [its] meaning would be in our own age, if it is not to be untimely—that is, to act against the age, and by so doing to have an effect on the age, and, let us hope, to the benefit of a future age.’<sup>3</sup> One way in which the history of philosophy can help to serve this purpose is the basic and familiar one of making the familiar seem strange, and conversely, but it needs to learn how better to do this. We should bear in mind this well-known aim of history—and specifically of a history that aims in some part to be philosophy—in turning, now, to some more specific questions about Descartes.

It used to be true (and may still be so) that the guide to the Panthéon in Paris would say at one point of the tour: ‘*Ici, mesdames et messieurs, vous voyez le tombeau du plus grand philosophe français, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.*’ One wonders what he would say if, as very nearly happened, Descartes’ body had also ended up in the Panthéon. Indeed, there are rather more similarities between the two than the usual descriptions allow. Both are marvellous writers, both are extremely self-consciously original, both have been massively influential, and, despite having very different attitudes towards antiquity, they have both centrally contributed to a distinctively modern consciousness. In these last respects, moreover, each of them presents problems to the history of ideas and to the history of philosophy: each of them has had an influence that owes a great deal to gigantic misunderstandings, and each has been made use of in

<sup>3</sup> F. Nietzsche, ‘History in the Service or Disservice of Life’, in *Unmodern Observations*, ed. William Arrowsmith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 88.

ways neither of them could, needless to say, either have foreseen or have tolerated. Going back to their original context, and to the influences on them, may indeed help to remove those misunderstandings, but at the same time it raises the question, in each case, of the thinker's originality.

In neither case is the originality to be denied—it is a question rather of its nature. With both of them, it is a matter of conscious self-presentation; it is not the more nearly naïve originality of Frege or of C. S. Peirce. In Descartes' case, this raises two questions. The first is where the idea of such a self-presentation came from. Descartes' methodological and metaphysical turn towards himself has been associated often enough with such influences as Augustine and Montaigne, but they do not provide enough to explain his presentation of his project as a way of life. The modes of 'self-fashioning' that Stephen Greenblatt has discussed in relation to the Renaissance consciousness<sup>4</sup> are perhaps relevant to the idea that Descartes had formed of what he was to do, an idea formed, of course, while he was pursuing the life of a soldier. In the words of Ausonius which he recalled, '*Quod vitae sectabor iter?*', it is important that the word is *iter*, not *via*: there is a journey to be made.

The second question concerns what we might find in Descartes if we removed the 'misunderstandings' that have so immeasurably contributed to and formed his influence. In asking this question, I am not looking for an understanding of Descartes that is free of later presuppositions, which benefits from no hindsight. Clearly, there could be no such thing. It is a question, rather, of its not benefiting from *this* hindsight, or the presuppositions peculiarly associated with our inherited history of philosophy. (This is one way in which we can aim to make the familiar strange again.) As things are, the history of ideas and the history of philosophy, applied to Descartes, are likely to yield, respectively, one of two types of understanding, one purely historical, and the other largely anachronistic. The history of ideas quite properly invites us to learn about late scholastic influences and the syllabus at La Flèche, or introduces us to problems that were encountered in developing an adequate mechanics of inertia. The history of philosophy, on the other hand, speaks in terms of how one can develop a non-transcendental epistemology starting from scepticism. The first of these two activities, the history of ideas, certainly has nothing wrong with it, but, in itself, it does not yield much philosophy that can help us in reviving a sense of strangeness or questionability about our own philosophical assumptions. It may be, simply and quietly, what it seeks to be, about the past. The history of

<sup>4</sup> S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

philosophy, very often, does no more to release us from our preconceptions, for the different reason that it is merely constructed out of our preconceptions. The important thing about these two approaches is not that one is historical in relation to Descartes, while the other is anachronistic. The point, rather, is that neither of them, as things are, helps us to use Descartes to gain what Nietzsche called an ‘untimely’ perspective on our philosophical concerns. The first fails to do so because it does not, in itself, yield philosophy; the second yields philosophy, but only too much of the time it yields *our* philosophy.

Any philosopher who is likely to be of interest now to the history of philosophy is going to raise questions of this kind. But such questions are specially raised by Descartes, because he makes a unique claim to the suspect title ‘the founder of modern philosophy’. At least two difficulties attach to this title, and to Descartes’ relation to it. One of them is closely connected to the matter I mentioned before, of Descartes’ self-presentation. A difficulty in getting behind this title is that Descartes seems to have arranged things, in particular his presentation of himself, in order to invite such a title; to a greater extent than many philosophers, Descartes is the architect of his own reputation and, by the same token, responsible for some of the misunderstandings that have attached themselves to that reputation.

A more general difficulty lies in the shifting content of the idea of ‘modern philosophy’ and of what could count as being its founder. ‘Modern philosophy’ used to mean *our* philosophy, but perhaps that is no longer true: some would say that ‘modern’ now signified only a period in the history of philosophy, a period that is closed or is closing. Perhaps it makes less difference than one might suppose to the present discussion whether one accepts that description or not. Even if the ‘modern philosophy’ that Descartes founded is taken to be the philosophy to which our discussions still contribute, Descartes’ relation to it has for a long time been problematical or contested. The view which takes the philosophy of language rather than epistemology as the heart of philosophy has already for a long time relegated Descartes to the role of anti-hero, and has replaced him with Frege in the position of the founder of legitimate modern philosophical activity. This view itself, of course, has various ways of using Descartes, with the result that he remains part of the discourse of philosophy. One important use is indeed in the role of anti-hero: his works (or a few of them) are read (or partly read) as the most challenging and informatively misleading example of what is to be rejected.

Even in this role, however, he is rather paradoxically used. Those who have wanted to displace epistemology, and in particular a concern with scepticism, from a central place in philosophy have in many cases

claimed to be interested in diagnosing the apparent attractions of the problem; they have wanted to replace attempts to answer it with an understanding of why we are tempted into it. **Descartes is typically wheeled out as an example of one who indulged himself in trying to answer the problem of scepticism, but not so much, it seems, as someone from whom we can learn about the temptations to get into it.** He is typically presented, in his brief appearance at the beginning of philosophy courses, as one who simply had a weakness for scepticism, or perhaps for mathematical certainty; or a brief expedition is made into the history of ideas to bring back an externalist explanation in terms of seventeenth-century Christian apologetics.

This obviously does little good for the understanding of Descartes or of scepticism, and it is fairly damaging to a sense of philosophy itself and of its history. If one presents Descartes as the founder of modern philosophy, and as seized by the problem of scepticism; if the problem of scepticism is said to be interesting not for its solution, but for the motives that lead to it; and if Descartes is not represented as displaying any interesting motive for it, but is diagnosed as being trapped in history, or (as it is more usually explained) in whatever misconception particularly impresses the teacher as providing the source of scepticism: a student will reasonably conclude, not only that Descartes is a fool, or at least that he has been overtaken by history, but, more damagingly, that a subject which not only has him as its founder but thinks it important that one should now read the works of such a founder cannot be a very serious subject. Descartes' own approach to his problems had better be presented as adequate to our own interest both in them and in him.

Not every view of Descartes as part of present philosophy need treat him as an anti-hero. He can be taken to be the founder of a modern philosophy to which we still belong in virtue of more general characteristics of his work that we strive to share: that it claims to persuade by argument and the fact that its starting-point (unlike its conclusions) is not religious. This view of Descartes depends, like the anti-hero view, on interpreting it so as to make a particular kind of sense as philosophy. It depends, that is to say, on the activity that I called 'the history of philosophy'. But, equally, those who wish to detach themselves from 'modern philosophy', leaving Descartes as the founder of a certain period in philosophy's history, cannot do without the activity of interpreting him in ways that result in a set of philosophical claims. Their style of doing this is likely to lean more heavily in the direction of interpreting his philosophy in terms of a set of supposed influences. **The need to separate the activities the writers would like us to pursue from something now delimited as having been 'modern philosophy' requires them to identify a set of re-**

cent philosophical activities, the activities of 'modern philosophy', precisely as having been influenced by Descartes.

This post-modern approach, as it may be called, typically runs the risk of a split consciousness. On the one hand, it has to take the history of philosophy seriously enough to constitute a tradition; it has to detect enough continuity of concerns and assumptions to support the claims of influence. On the other hand, if it looks closely enough, it will, of course, find that the influence has worked, and the tradition been constituted, through misunderstanding. The writers it invokes will, at the very least, have made partial and selective use of earlier writers, since that is what creative writers, philosophers or not, of course do with the writers they read. Now the recognition of these facts need not destroy the image of the tradition; it may merely constitute it as a tradition of misunderstanding. But it has a damaging effect on the use that the post-modern critic can make of the tradition. The better its writers are understood, the less it looks as though they necessarily hang together as the 'modernity' that the critic wants to get beyond. Ironically enough, his own typical emphasis on contingency should make him less contented with the Hegelian classifications that define his own historical position.

He may say that he need not, after all, take his own historical position too seriously. The constitution of the 'modern' tradition, with Descartes as its founder, may figure simply as a ludic trope, which gains a certain edge from the fact that its members, including Descartes himself, usually do not seem, when they are more closely examined, to be doing quite what the story of the tradition requires them to be doing. But the only point of the ludic, at least as deployed in the history of philosophy, is to disturb and unsettle, and the effect of taking the tradition of modernity as given, with Descartes as its founder, can only be deeply settling and undisturbing, since it confronts us exactly with what we thought we had already. Our sense of our situation will be unsettled only when we come to see Descartes and the other supposed contributors as stranger than they seem while they are still regarded as the constituents of that tradition.

What was called in the original distinction 'the history of philosophy' is essential to any activity that is going to give a philosophical point to writing historically about philosophy. That point is going principally to be found in the possibility of the past philosophy's being untimely, and helping to make strange what is familiar in our own assumptions. In order to do this, the history of philosophy must be separated from two tendencies with which it has often been associated. On the one hand, it cannot treat its object as though it were merely contemporary, without losing the point of historical distance altogether. On the other hand, it

cannot be identified with the history of influence, the progressive exploitation of original writing in one or more philosophical traditions; this, again, destroys strangeness, by following a path which necessarily lands us at precisely the place we are at. What we must do is to use the philosophical materials that we now have to hand, together with historical understanding, in order to find in, or make from, the philosophy of the past a philosophical structure that will be strange enough to help us to question our present situation and the received picture of the tradition, including those materials themselves.