Reflections on the discipline of philosophy and its history

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Introduction

When Aristotle introduces his critique of the Platonic doctrine of ideas regarding the Idea of the Good as a guide to morals, he finds it necessary to reflect upon his relationship to his former mentor and the latter's disciples in the Academy. Thus he begins chapter 6 of book I of the *Nichomachean Ethics* with the following admission:

> We had perhaps better consider the universal good and discuss thoroughly what is meant [*legetai*] by it, although such an inquiry is made an uphill one by the fact that the Forms have been introduced by friends of our own. Yet it would perhaps be thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers or lovers of wisdom; for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honour truth above our friends.[1]

One might see this confession in light of an important Aristotelian distinction, one which itself can be seen as a sort of confession, given Aristotle's overall ambition of laying down guidelines for what we would today call proper scientific procedure. In a famous passage in the *Metaphysics* (1004b, 15–27), he asserts that the difference between sophistry, dialectics and philosophy rests not in their respective methods, but in the role the reasoning plays in one's life.[2] According to Aristotle, what the sophist says instrumentally in order to give the appearance of wisdom and the dialectician as an exercise, the philosopher is really trying to understand or know. The distinction Aristotle draws and the notion of truth in the passage cited above can and perhaps ought to be understood in terms of one another. The point of bringing these ideas together is to draw attention to an aspect of human thinking that was essential for earlier thinkers, but seems to have been largely forgotten today: the desire for truth is ultimately a moral demand that the individual makes on himself.

The paradox of this simple fact of life is that the need to get clear on things, to understand how things really are, is something that arises in the individual precisely because she is of necessity a member of a greater collective, a tradition or community. Being a member of a community, one is sometimes forced to take a stand on that community, or aspects of it.

A theoretical position or philosophical doctrine can constitute such a collective. As a proponent or representative of a certain viewpoint or position, the individual is faced with a difficulty. The distinction Aristotle makes between philosophy and dialectics can be understood, in modern terms, as the difference between free thinking and thinking that is characterized by its adaptation of, or submission to, the collective standards, evaluations, methods and concepts of a given scientific or scholarly community. Naturally, this does not mean that in order to possess intellectual integrity, one must distance oneself from one's teachers or colleagues. It might very well be the case that after long and hard thinking, one is all the more resolute in a shared point of view. What I wish to concentrate on here is the attitude one has to one's own theoretical stance or position, or the relationship between a thinker and his or her thoughts.

Not so very long ago, the academic ideal was to strive toward free thought, in contrast to "bourgeois thought", in a respect resembling the distinction drawn above. Naturally, this is not to say that all or even most academics realized this ideal, or even reflected upon it. To the contrary, some of the most eloquent defenses of that ideal were formulated as complaints about its erosion. But the attacks on dogmatism, scholasticism or bourgeois thinking were articulated on the basis of the assumption that the ideal itself was a shared ideal, if only implicitly and however poorly followed. As recently as the turn of the twentieth century, Hans Larsson wrote:

> Because of Socrates' struggle against wrong opinions, we easily forget his struggle against true ones. An opinion that is simply correct, which one has not understood and come to one one's own, is, for the friends of wisdom, nothing; even a correct opinion that leads to just action; without insight, on the basis of habit or authority, to act or think rightly, this was in the eyes of Socrates and Plato no virtue. Academic life begins, historically speaking, precisely when true opinion is set aside in favor not only of genuine knowledge, but also in favor of the free search for truth.[3]

In Larsson's view, free thought, at least as much as correct thought, *is* an ideal toward which we ought to strive. Larsson did not mean that the academically trained are freer from misconceptions or delusions than the populace at large, but that they, as learned men, ought to strive to be. Academic studies, according to Larsson, oblige one to enter adult life with more deeply considered reflections than one had before. Larsson's interpretation of the often derided motto inscribed on the portal to the Great Hall of Uppsala University's Main Building, "To think freely is great, to think rightly is greater"[4], is this: when one allows oneself to think freely, it is ultimately in order to be able to think rightly. It is an admonition to the individual to take responsibility for his ideas, opinions and habits of mind.

Larsson makes it clear that the motto ought not to be applied to the results of one's thinking, but rather to one's approach and attitude.[5] The maxim endorses the *desire* both to think freely and to think rightly. Thus, it is obviously a moral maxim. It might very well be the case that, having thought something through, the opinion one arrives at is very much in harmony with, or even identical to, what everyone else says. But Larsson thinks that the motto ought to be taken above all as a warning against the disposition to "think freely" *tout simple*, without any regard for where that thought is leading: "a bourgeois liberalism that has lost, or still not matured to, a warm sensitivity to matters and to what is right."[6] There are, however, also many who are disposed toward thinking rightly without thinking freely. In this respect, the desire to think rightly, on the one hand, and social, political, ideological and professional norms, on the other, may well stand in conflict with one another. The individual who tries his best to think rightly, regardless of the opinions of his community, thus bestows upon himself the right to think for himself (for who else can bestow that right upon him?). Giving oneself the right to think things through for oneself is, I take it, what Larsson is aiming at in his distinction between applying the motto to the results of one's thinking and applying it to thinking itself. Clearly, demanding that thinking itself be "right" according to some set of pre-established norms and conventions can only lead to restricted thought, the opposite of a way of thinking that does not assume at the outset what sorts of results and consequences are "acceptable", "important" or "fruitful".

Here one ought to distinguish between philosophical or scientific thinking or reflection in the broader sense, and our contemporary notions of research and scholarship. One may reasonably question whether research today can be free in anything but the "bourgeois liberal" sense that Larsson contrasts with what he calls "academic" or "scientific" thinking.[7] Academic research today is characterized by its "bourgeois" social function, the point of which is to be useful for society (as if we already knew, in advance of any serious reflection, what we need). Research and scholarship are to be conducted in and through *de facto* institutions developed in accordance with what is deemed progress and utility from the perspective of society as it is.[8]

It seems to me that the academic ideal described by Larsson reflects an idea of the university that we have lost. The medieval university's *artes liberales* were conceived to pave the way for professional studies in *juris prudence*, medicine and theology; the three higher faculties for the training of lawyers, doctors and priests assumed that the students had a solid ground to stand on when they received their professional education. Vocational studies were to be integrated into something greater. But the content of the earlier studies were not intended as mere intellectual decoration. Rather, the general studies with which the students began their higher

education transmitted "the system of ideas, concerning the world and humanity, which the man of that time possessed. It was, consequently, the repertory of convictions which became the effective guide of his existence."[9] These studies included grammar, rhetoric, logic (*trivium*) and astronomi, geometry, arithmetic and harmony (*quadrivium*). The subjects were thought to hang together in a system, or rather, they constituted a unified whole in which man, as a spiritual being, was an integral part. Not to know one's position and place in the whole and still be expected to exercise such crucial professions such as that of a priest or a lawyer would be unthinkable. And yet, in our day, the humanities is seen by many as, in the best case, a means of cultivating tomorrow's lawyers, doctors and engineers so that they won't be all too boorish. We offer them courses in ethics, rhetoric, and a smattering of history. After all, *everyone* agrees that historical awareness is a good thing. We're all inclined to quote Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."[10] But pious pronouncements concerning the importance of the study of history, philosophy and literature often have a defensive, legitimizing function. They are used to justify the existence of disciplines and institutions; precisely because it is not self-evident that philosophy, for example, is important. In this respect, philosophy today is largely in the same position as theology a century ago. And one might wonder if our need to justify the existence of the discipline of philosophy in general, or the study of its history in particular, is not a sign of "fatigue and decay", as Nietzsche would say. Were it really alive, there would be no question of legitimization. This is, I think, how we have to understand postmodern obituaries concerning the demise of philosophy.

Compare these with Nietzsche's assertion that "God is dead", which is commonly treated as if it were Nietzsche himself who committed deicide. But does Nietzsche *demand* of his readers that they cease believing in God? It's not as if Nietzsche wanted to replace God with "the absence of God" as a metaphysical starting-point, i.e. atheism as a philosophical position. One might read, for instance, book III of *The Gay Science,* as simply pointing out that the language of guilt, punishment and reward, right and wrong, and good and evil were part of a religious way of life that had ceased to exist for most people in Europe. These terms had *already* lost their meaning. What remained were abstract codes and empty forms. In this light, we can see Nietzsche's often trying praise of hardness, strength, will, and nobility of character as words of encouragement to those who shared his suspicions. Nietzsche was calling for what Heidegger would later characterize as *Beschlossenheit*, resoluteness, in the face of the new facts of life. In this respect, Nietzsche's ethical teaching is indistinguishable from his conceptual analysis. It seems to me that treating the history of philosophy as merely, or even primarily, a specialization within the discipline of philosophy (or intellectual history, for that matter) is to drain

it of its vitality, or to contribute to its demise. If we simply take for granted that the study of it has value without seriously asking ourselves wherein that value resides and in what respect it is valuable for us today, we treat as an artifact rather than as something alive within us as philosophers. There is a difference between thinking through the history of philosophy as a set of doctrines and arguments, and thinking *through* the history of philosophy, that is, reflecting on how we came to think in certain terms, to ask ourselves certain kinds of questions about our own starting-points inspired by past attempts.

What I will be discussing in what follows is how academic scholarship and research in philosophy (and its history) has divorced itself from philosophy in the sense Aristotle and even Larsson understood it, that is, as the free pursuit of truth. The latter is not something pursued for its ostensible utility (by definition, according to the tradition from Plato to Kant), but must be seen as a right one gives oneself as well as a demand one makes on oneself. In that respect, I wish to suggest, philosophy is not the accepted arguments, methods, and criteria of the scholarly community of professional philosophers. Yet, oddly enough, this "collectivist" standpoint seems to be an unquestioned assumption shared by philosophers inclined toward "systematic" treatments of the history of philosophy, the view that there is a common "philosophical" content (rational argument, or something like it) to past works, and sociological and historical treatments of those works. I want to say that to understand what it means to think freely and rightly is a matter of attaining awareness about who we are, the philosophical question *par excellence* since antiquity, and that we can come to this understanding through the history of philosophy, but that this requires above all else *thinking*, which is not the same thing as scholarly research (although that is surely an important part of it). This means, among other things, that I will not be talking about philosophy as a unified subject or subject matter, but will confine myself to a certain manner of thinking which seems to be a common characteristic among the texts generally seen to be classics of Western thought. I will not be following any given scholarly praxis as to what is to be considered canonical, and I will not be arguing for or against any model of interpretation. The focus throughout will be on the idea of philosophy as free thinking, rather than as a distinct discipline with a unified history.

The Individual and the Tradition

If we do not assume a certain set of questions, a certain manner of reasoning or a certain canon as definitive of philosophy, how are we to know which questions are important? And further, without such assumptions, how can we even know that our thoughts are, as it were, "ours"? In short, how can we know if we are thinking "rightly" in Larsson's sense, that is, freely?

And what does it really mean to hold oneself accountable for one's thoughts? Philosophy is, after all, an academic subject, a discipline among others, and, of course, shares the same social tendencies, structures and institutional characteristics as any other human activity: collective norms and values, political infighting, external demands, collegiality, personal animosities, networks, cognitive cronyism, power struggles and so forth. These aspects are treated merely anecdotally, if at all, in philosophy's internal historiography, since they are considered to be incidental, questions of context, rather than questions concerning the nature of philosophy as such. But what then is the nature of philosophy? What is distinctive of philosophical thinking? The question of the value and purpose of studying the history of philosophy, as well as what should be counted as the canon and content of that history, necessarily hangs on the answer to these questions.

What do we usually say about the value of reading Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, or Nietzsche? A number of claims are standard. We say that it is a part of a good education, or one points to the value of becoming historically conscious, and, of course, we maintain the value of training in "critical thinking". Those who become specialists on a certain thinker, period or tradition naturally assume that there are more or less adequate interpretations of the texts which they study, and that it is important to learn the more adequate interpretation, since there is something important and correct that the philosopher in question has to say. This reasonable and natural assumption can be problematic, however, when it leads to treating the text as though it were the finished product, the doctrines and arguments, rather than the way of approaching and thinking through a problem, that constitutes "the philosophical content". In so doing, we run the risk of assuming certain contemporary ideas and ideals (often reflected in disciplinary norms as well as in philosophy's internal historiography) as given (for example, the idea of philosophy as primarily a theoretical or intellectual enterprise aimed at increasing our store of knowledge).

What is it that leads us to call certain texts "philosophical classics"? Often enough, it is that these works display a certain specific characteristic attitude toward the predominant ideas of the time, an attitude that can be described as doubtful, or, as we are wont to say, "critical". If we were to adopt the same attitude in reading these cherished works, our purpose would not be to find and formulate arguments and counter-arguments, buttressed by citations and quotations. We might rather follow Nietzsche's advice, and instead of viewing the past through the present, try to see the present through the eyes of, say Plato or Kant. The point would then not be to capture the true or most correct interpretation of Plato or Kant, but to achieve a certain a *Verfremdungseffekt* with regard to our own contemporary ideas and assumptions, to make what is most self-evident for us, less so. This distance should help us see more clearly which ideas are still applicable and meaningful and just how far they apply to us, and

which ideas and notions we should cast off, because they really don't apply anymore, but address problems belonging to another era and other circumstances.

What kind of reading best captures the tentative or "critical" spirit of philosophical texts? Aren't we all interested in, even intent upon, understanding philosophical texts as they were intended to be understood? The problem is rather how to achieve that understanding. We seem to be inexorably drawn into thorny issues concerning authorial intention, what constitutes relevant context, the specific form of philosophical argumentation and ideas of rationality, and so on. Such questions, largely reflected in the debate between systematic/internalist/textualist approaches and historical/externalist/contextualist approaches, are, in part, a consequence of the underlying problem that I wish to address here, namely, the attitude we have when "doing philosophy".

How we read philosophical texts is of a piece with the attitude and approach we have to philosophy, or even thinking, in general. The discipline of philosophy is commonly treated as if consisted of doctrines, theories and positions, and the arguments for and against these. The academic discipline of philosophy must consist of such things, of course, especially at the undergraduate level. But even scholarly research in philosophy dissolves into various schools and theories, and arguments for and against. Yet it is doubtful that the philosophical thinkers who are often the object of scholarship in the history of philosophy had this attitude toward their work. To the contrary, it is striking how often one comes across passages in which the idea that philosophy itself consists of doctrines and positions is directly attacked. Aside from the infamous so-called "anti-philosophers" such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, one might mention Kant and Husserl. Kant writes:

> As to *certainty*, I have prescribed to myself the maxim, that in this kind of investigation it is in no wise permissible to hold *opinions*. Everything, therefore, which bears any manner of resemblance to an hypothesis is to be treated as contraband; it is not to be put up with for sale even at the lowest price, but forthwith confiscated, immediately upon detection. [11]

Apparently, Kant did not think that philosophical teachings or arguments had any value unto themselves, if they did not constitute an integral part of the answer to a question that is important to us (in this case, how certain knowledge is possible). Speculative efforts stand rather in the way of philosophy in Kant's sense, which is about critically assessing its own possibilities and limitations. But philosophical thinking in this respect is not, according to Kant, something that one learns once and for all as one learns a fact. It is rather a way of conducting oneself in one's thinking, and what philosophical thinking looks like will vary with what it is one

is thinking about. The *philosophical* work of understanding, for example, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, is something that each one of us has to do for and by himself:

> Anyone, therefore, who has *learnt* (in the strict sense of that term) a system philosophy […] although he may well have all its principles, explanations, and proofs, together with the formal divisions of the whole body of the doctrine, in his head, and so to speak, at his fingers' ends, has no more than a complete *historical* knowledge […] He knows and judges only what has been given to him. […] He has formed his mind on another's, and the imitative faculty is not productive. In other words, his knowledge has not arisen in him *out* of reason, and although, objectively considered, it is indeed knowledge due to reason, it is yet, in its subjective character, merely historical. He has grasped and kept; that is, he has learnt well, and is merely a plaster-cast of a living man. [12]

In Kant's view, the essence of philosophical understanding is that it is something that arises in the individual as subject; all else is "merely historical" understanding. Husserl echoes Kant's dismissal of hypotheses in philosophy in his complaint on the decline of philosophy. He asserts that faith in science, a faith which would have replaced the religious faith of European culture, had been reduced to mere convention, and lost its authenticity and atrophied:

> When, with the beginning of modern times, religious belief was becoming more and more externalized as a lifeless conviction, men of intellect were lifted by a new belief, their great belief in an autonomous philosophy and science. The whole of human culture was to be guided by scientific insights and thus reformed, as new and autonomous. But meanwhile this belief too has begun to languish. Not without reason. Instead of a unitary living philosophy, we have a philosophical literature growing beyond all bounds and almost without coherence. Instead of a serious discussion among conflicting theories that, in their very conflict, demonstrate the intimacy with which they belong together, the commonness of their underlying convictions, and an unswerving belief in a true philosophy, we have a pseudo-reporting and a pseudo-criticizing, a mere semblance of philosophizing seriously with and form one another.[13]

Notice in both cases the emphasis on philosophy as something alive, as a way of conducting one's thought, in contrast to philosophy as a subject, a system of doctrines, definitions and criteria isolated from the lives we lead, a contrast reminiscent of Aristotle's distinction between dialectics and philosophy.[14] What does the difference mean for how we read philosophical works, and for the question of the real aim and substance of philosophical thinking? For one thing, it means that debates and theories are fully meaningful only in the context of the problem(s) that they are

supposed to address. In this respect, there should be no difference in practice between concentrating on a philosopher's thinking and concentrating on the historical conditions of that thinking in terms of intellectual climate and context – contemporary theories and doctrines, notions and concepts prevalent at the time, the language in which his ideas are with historical necessity formulated. This means reading, say, Nietzsche, from a first-person perspective, thinking through the questions he asked and the problems he had. Nietzsche's way of formulating problems is not something that can be isolated from the historical context without loss of meaning. This is all the more true of his attempts at solving those problems, his "answers". Compare this approach now to treating his philosophy as a set of doctrines ("the eternal return", perspectivism, the superman, etc.). The latter is, to paraphrase Nietzsche, to separate the prescription he wrote from the diagnosis he gave of his culture, which impelled him to prescribe just that medicine and not something else.

At the same time, we ought to remind ourselves that our ideas, notions and cultural conditions are just as "historically informed" or "historically determined" as those we study. Like Kant and Nietzsche, we find ourselves in an intellectual tradition that has preceded us and formed our philosophical language and thought-forms. And our way of approaching the problems with which Kant or Nietzsche struggled have arisen in the wake of that composite history of concept-formation, which includes the tradition of Kant- and Nietzsche-reception. These connections are not always transparent, precisely because they are so much a part of us that we fail to recognize how much we participate in their continuation. To read Plato or Kant with seriousness of philosophical purpose means then, among other things, to reflect upon how we read historical philosophical texts. The difficulty resides in seeing our own starting points as less self-evident and necessary than we are accustomed to doing, that is, in noticing that we have starting points and identifying them as such. This difficulty can only be handled by taking into consideration the historical course of events through which just these concepts and solutions came to have the self-evident standing that they have for us. Understanding a classic philosophical text does not require that we pose two distinct questions: "What circumstances gave rise to this philosophical argument or claim?", on the one hand, and "What does this philosopher actually claim, and is his argument valid?", on the other. As Collingwood has argued, the meaning and validity of an answer cannot be answered in isolation from the circumstances that give rise to the question to which it is an answer. It's not as if thoughts actually have an inside ("philosophical content") and an outside ("historical context"), even if we may, for scholarly reasons, choose to view them that way. To understand the context in which a problem and an attempt to resolve it are at all comprehensible is a necessary part of understanding the question.

Philosophy as a Discipline

It might seem as if I've simply summarized briefly a view of how to read classical texts that has been articulated before and better in various ways by others: Collingwood, Gadamer, or even T.S. Eliot, for that matter.[15] In a sense, that is true, but my purpose here is not to articulate a theoretical position regarding the conditions for the possibility of historical and/or philosophical understanding. My claim is much simpler, namely, that there is something valuable in the *attempt* to understand a thinker from the inside. But I do not mean to argue that there is some sort of theoretical or logical necessity to this view. The point is again moral. Reading Nietzsche or Kant can help us compare and assess different ways of thinking about *our* problems and questions today (for example, the ongoing debate concerning the crisis of the humanities). This approach might well be considered undisciplined from a professional or institutional point of view. It goes against the grain of scholarly practice in philosophy in general, and perhaps the history of philosophy in particular. But, following Kant, I would argue that this "undisciplined" manner of proceeding requires another kind of discipline, the self-discipline required to take responsibility for one's own thinking.[16] As I think I've already made clear, it is *not* a question of originality. To the contrary, one might formulate Kant's demand that one submits one's methods and basic concepts to critique in terms of intellectual self-scrutiny. One can ask oneself why one thinks that it is important to study and understand this or that philosopher, to learn the historical conditions in which an idea is formulated, and so forth, and perhaps arrive at the conclusion that it isn't all that important or relevant, or that perhaps one never really understood what it was *really* about in the first place. Such a stance, in turn, requires that one perhaps must deny oneself the use of certain conventional professional strategies, such as congratulations ("there are exciting new developments in field X"), invitations ("more work needs to be done in this area") or promises ("Y's contribution will lead to a fruitful discussion about Z"). One result of a philosophical reflection, for instance, might very well be that one arrives at the conclusion that there wasn't a real problem (for us) here to begin with.

Here is an illustration of what I think justifies this approach to the history of philosophy. Recently, I was struggling with the question of why Weber claimed that the man who wishes to devote his life to academic research must reconcile himself to its growing tendency toward specialization.[17] Part of the answer is surely to be found in connection with Weber's explicit desire to address all the young free spirits at the universities who had cast off the yoke of scientific and scholarly thinking in search of something more vital, an attitude which Weber apparently felt had simply gotten out of hand, even if they had good reason to criticize "dead knowledge".

But I was not entirely satisfied with this answer, especially in light of Weber's own extraordinary contributions to economics, history, law, philosophy, sociology, etc. My own view is that we still have a great deal to learn from Weber about how we think, how we have come to think the way we do, and what roads are open (or closed) to the individual in her intellectual development. Yet I couldn't make the claim about the necessity of specialization fit with the rest of Weber's thought. So I asked a very knowledgeable and thoughtful Weber-scholar, a specialist, someone well-acquainted with German intellectual and academic life at the turn of the century, its language, concepts and conventions, who had read Weber's books, diary entries and correspondence, protocols from meetings, and the like.

Now one can pose the questions "What exactly does Weber mean by specialization, and why does he see it as a necessity?" as an academic question in one's research, to get published, as a contribution to the history of sociology, as an "area of competence or specialization" on one's CV. But these professional or disciplinary motives are, can and ought to be held distinct from a genuine concern for the question in and of itself. And a question and answer that has no meaning and value in and of itself, which we do not have a genuine concern for or vested interest in, is just dead knowledge. (Weber would certainly endorse that view.) The question and its answer are important and meaningful to the extent that we can use the answer in some way, for example, in order to help us achieve clarity about some problem we actually have (such as the aim, meaning, value and substance of the idea of science and scholarship). Since the question is important for many of us, it is clearly a very good and valuable thing that there are intellectual historians who devote themselves to serious Weber studies, research that, in the best case, using the historical context, provides us with insight into Weber's thinking. Here I cannot see an intrinsic conflict between the historical question and the philosophical question "What did Weber mean?", even if it is entirely possible to cultivate one aspect or another. This insight that I needed to consult a Weber specialist constituted a partial answer to my question concerning the necessity of specialization (although it turned out that, as far as our scholar was aware, Weber had never explicitly explained this assertion).

Let us return to the ostensible conflict between a systematic and an historical approach to philosophical classics in light of what I've said above. Suppose we caricature for a moment the two approaches and say something like this. The historical approach attempts to describe the *de facto* conditions under which past thinkers worked, the intellectual climate and debates of the period, the connotations of various terms at the time, and so forth. This approach is thought to balance and complement one-sided philosophical analyses in which such considerations, if they appear at all, are treated as largely secondary and incidental (which is to say that they are not treated as *conditions* at all). The systematic position is that

there is something that is philosophical thinking, which is not reducible to the historical context, but has to do with certain kinds of questions, how a position is argued, criteria for validity of argumentation, rationality and so forth. If we try to formulate an epistemological justification for choosing one of the two approaches, we may run up against problems concerning the possibilities, limitations and uses of historical knowledge, doubts concerning the objectivity of our criteria for interpretation, the difficulties associated with the notion of authorial intention, the issue of self-reference with regard to historical claims, etc. These concerns tend to generate more general debates regarding historicism as a methodological starting point or historicity as a philosophical problem. It seems to me that we should here be a bit cautious, or, as Nietzsche would say, "unphilosophical".[18]

One might pause to ask if the general question of the historicity of philosophical texts, a question that has its own history and which also has been formulated under certain specific historical conditions, has not itself become such a problem that it ought to be submitted to critique in the Kantian sense. In short, is the general question "To what extent is it possible to understand and assess earlier thinkers?" a question in which we can achieve clarity? To be sure, certain doctrines and ideas will necessarily feel remote, obsolete and/or irrelevant. But if we try to understand what it was that the thinker in question had on his mind, what problem he was grappling with (these things are for the most part explicit in philosophical works deemed classic), we notice that it is most often the train of thought, "the method", that is the solution, rather than the doctrines or theories stemming from it. The heart of the question is often of the kind: "How should we think in order – to be certain/ become aware of our presuppositions/increase our knowledge of the world?" etc. In Kant's case, for example, the critical method is what he takes to the *sine qua non* of his philosophy, as a way of thinking. And the core of the critical method is the requirement that each and everyone must make of himself always to relate the object of knowledge to the grounds upon which the question is posed. Even if Kant is manifestly proud of his table of categories, as Nietzsche remarks, they do not constitute the aim of the first critique. Rather, it is Kant's attitude and approach, his way of working and thinking, which makes his philosophy what it is. Barring the possibility of any definitive answer to the question "What is philosophy?", this attitude and approach may well be as close as we can get to a characterization of its idea and ideal.

Philosophy and Academic Scholarship

I've said that scholarship and research in the history of philosophy, if it is to have some meaning for us today, some use, should avoid the pitfalls of

both an exaggeratedly systematic approach and a purely historical approach. This assertion is fairly uncontroversial, or even trivial, taken as a methodological principle. But that is not how I intend it. Rather, I wish to say that there is a tendency in a great deal of scholarship to treat thought as if the fact that there was an individual who had those thoughts were of secondary importance, if pertinent at all. The systematic approach treats the thoughts as independent of the life the thinker led, aside from the books he read and perhaps the philosophical correspondence in which he engaged, that is, aside from the "philosophical context". It were as if the problems that the philosopher was trying to come to grips with floated freely from the human being who had them, in some abstract sphere of "the properly philosophical". The historical approach also tends to stress the intellectual context and milieu, but in a broader sense, often including biographical, social and/ political factors, thereby also reducing the thinker to a representative for, or a product of, that environment. There is little emphasis on the individual human character of the thought (which is not the same thing as personal psychological idiosyncrasies or personality traits).[19]

In our daily interaction with each other in our lives, we naturally try to understand others within context, that is, we understand each other's actions and speech largely in terms of the situation in which the speech and actions make sense. At the same time, most actions and speech are relatively transparent, which is simply to say that we take for granted the meaningfulness of that action or remark. As scholars and researchers, however, we consider such an approach to the thought of others naive.[20] We study Kant as if his motive for thinking the thoughts expressed in the *Critique of pure reason* were to have written the *Critique of pure reason*. Yet few of us would deny that Kant had genuine doubts and questions concerning human knowledge and human freedom, and that his writings were an attempt to work them out and help others with the same doubts and questions. We may all agree that the proposed solutions only make sense in light of the problems understood as genuine problems that someone might have. But I want to say something more. I would suggest that this aspect of his thinking, the questions and doubts, are more relevant, useful and enlightening to us today, than his answers, and that this is where we ought to focus our attention.

Let us say that someone today wishes to think for himself within the academic community of philosophers, or historians, or any discipline one cares to consider, and the question that is on his mind is the conditions, possibilities and limitations of science and scholarship today. Problems will inevitably arise, since he has in a sense stepped outside of his discipline, which naturally makes his work difficult to assess as a contribution to that discipline. Thus he can really only rely on his own judgment (and thereby take the risk that the products of his efforts are not very good). The young

Michel Foucault, to take an example from our own epoch and corner of the world, stepped outside of the history of science and ideas as the discipline was understood and understood itself when he proposed to present a dissertation which, instead of describing the history of the science of psychiatry as such, would describe "the social, moral and imaginary context in which it developed."[21] The professor to whom he had submitted the proposal, Sten Lindroth, apparently did not see it as a viable topic for a thesis in intellectual history. (The reader will recognize the description of what was to become the pioneering work *Madness and civilization*).[22] Or take the young philologist Wilamowitz-Möllendorff's infamous response to his colleague Friedrich Nietzsche's first book, in which Nietzsche attempted to understand the origins of western aesthetic and scientific culture on the basis of the established scholarly research question of the birth of Attic tragedy. The criticism was harsh: the author of this book denigrates the historical-critical method which constitutes the very foundation of the most thorough and respected classical studies, and imputes to this prominent scholarship a complete misunderstanding of its subject.[23] As Professor Nietzsche is so bold as to call into question the very essence of scholarship on the basis of his own conceited obstinacy, he ought to step down from the podium. He has relinquished all claims to philological scholarship.[24] In an important sense, of course, Wilamowitz was right. Nietzsche's greatness lay elsewhere.

Many years later, when Nietzsche asked himself why he wrote *The birth of tragedy*, he realized that his problem did not ultimately concern the scholarly issues the book seemed to address, but rather what he described as "the problem of science – science conceived as problematic." Or, as he writes a few lines earlier:

> And science itself, our science – indeed, what is the significance of all science, seen as a symptom of life? For what – worse yet, *whence* – all science? How now? Is the resolve to be so scientific about everything perhaps a kind of fear of, an escape from, pessimism? A subtle last resort against – *truth*? And, morally speaking, a sort of cowardice and falseness? [25]

Would it even make sense to say that the young Nietzsche *intended* to doubt the foundations of the subject in which he was appointed professor? It was hardly the case that he made the judgment that a critique of the idea of scholarship or science as such constituted a contribution to the progress, prestige or development of the discipline. Rather, he must have begun actually to have doubts, not as a scholarly or professional research tactic, but genuinely in his heart and mind, regarding the science of philology. His ideas, his doubts, were not themselves research questions within some established areas of competence or specialization within the discipline.

The list of thinkers whose life's work can be described as devoted to trying to answer questions that no one else was asking, or even could see as relevant and real questions, would constitute a canon of scientific and philosophical thinking in the West. If one actually succeeds in shaking off the habits of mind, ways of thinking and conventional assumptions that characterize one's discipline to such an extent that one gives rise to a new subject, areas of research, scholarly orientation or methodology, one is likely to end up on that list. But what about the rest of us? There would seem to be two options. One can "discipline oneself" in the sense that one adapts and submits to the conventions and norms of academic writing and teaching within one's field. Or one can practice another kind of self-discipline, which means always trying to be honest with oneself about what problems are genuinely problems, and not merely "academic questions", and trying one's best to come to clarity about these questions and, perhaps through teaching, help others come to clarity about some important question. Once more, this way of seeing philosophy is a moral demand at least as much as an intellectual one. Having a sense of intellectual responsibility is its own reward. One should not expect any other.

This is the bind of free thinking. To think freely is simply to try, as best one can, to slacken the grip of the very tradition or collective that constitutes the basis and context of one's thoughts. Without inherited concepts, assumptions and shared habits of mind, we have nothing to think with or about. One always begins *in medias res*. This aspect of our thinking has led some to draw the conclusion that we are never really alone with or in our thoughts: we are born, raised and live in, through and with the speech and ideas of others; the tradition and the community act upon us even as that acting is concealed from us, hidden from us in our own thoughts, our attitudes, our very gaze. (I'm thinking here of certain common themes in social constructivist theories.) And so one might be driven as far as to say that one never think freely, that we are always already plaster-casts of others. I think that this is an extreme conclusion to draw from a legitimate concern. Free thinking, or "philosophical thinking" in the sense that I've characterized it, can be seen as nothing more than the feeling that one doesn't know at the outset how one should proceed simply on the basis of standard practice. One can imagine, and indeed we have numerous historical cases, of someone perfectly adept at his discipline, who has nonetheless begun to feel uncertain about its foundations, its value and its purpose. In such cases, the "research" conducted is not a matter of working on a pre-defined area of study with standard techniques and concepts, but rather consists in the attempt to formulate and resolve a real problem one has. One might, for example, have a genuine concern about where teaching, scholarship and science are headed today, so that one begins to ask oneself certain questions about the university as an idea and as an institution. One is not simply "curious" or "interested". A real

question is something that arises in one's *life* as a thinker. One does not *choose* to have it, just as genuine doubt (as opposed to methodological doubt) is not something that one employs, but one has.

One might reasonably object at this juncture that there are other kinds of moral obligations, another kind of responsibility associated with science and scholarship, aside from such lofty visions. Let us say, for instance, that someone actually took seriously what I have said here. He might reasonably demand that I be able to answer a number of relevant questions: How does one design a course-plan on this model? What would examinations look like? How are we to assess research? On what grounds do we make academic appointments? These questions belong to the organization and institution of the discipline of philosophy, and not to philosophy as a discipline of the thinker as individual. If we accept that the latter is reducible to the former, we thereby largely disavow the value of both. I fail to see how such a sensibility furthers philosophical thinking either as an idea or as an institution.[26]

Summary

Reflections on the discipline of philosophy and its history. By Sharon Rider. This essay deals with the relationship between the history of philosophy as an area of scholarly research and the history of philosophy as a necessary part of the individual thinker's self-examination. It is suggested that both internalist and externalist readings of the canon tend to stress the intellectual products of philosophical reflection in terms of their function as representative for a collective, be it synchronic or diachronic, rather than as examples of how to think through a problem by means of intellectual self-scrutiny. Citing historical cases, it argues that the latter captures the aim and meaning of philosophy as it was understood by thinkers of the past, but that the increased institutionalization of the discipline has effectively eliminated this aspect, to the detriment of philosophy in both senses.

Noter

1 Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D.Ross (Oxford, 1966).

2 "[D]ialecticians and sophists appear to be philosophers; for sophistry is but apparent wisdom, and dialecticians converse about any and all affairs on the ground that being is common to all. But, evidently, they converse about all these matters because all are appropriate to philosophy. Sophistry and dialectic, indeed, revolve about the same kind of concerns as does philosophy; but philosophy differs from dialectic in degree of power, and from sophistry, in kind of life. For dialectic puts questions about matters which philosophy knows, and sophistry appears to be, but is not, philosophy." Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Hope (New York, 1952).

3 "Man glömmer lätt för Sokrates kamp mot de orätta meningarna hans kamp mot de rätta. En riktig mening, rätt och slätt, som man icke förstått och själv tänkt sig till, den är för vishetsvännerna ingenting; även en

riktig mening som leder till riktigt handlande; att utan insikt, på grund av vana eller auktoritet, tänka eller göra det rätta, det var i Sokrates och Platons ögon ingen dygd. Det akademiska livet begynner, historiskt sett, just med det att sätta den rätta meningen tillbaka ej blott för det verkliga vetandet utan ock för det fria sökandet efter sanning." Hans Larsson, "Två akademiska valspråk", in *Reflexioner för dagen* (1911; Stockholm, 1921), 52.

4 "Att tänka fritt är stort, att tänka rätt är större." The inscription is a quotation from Tomas Thorild (1759–1808). Thorild is known, among other things, for defending the freedom of genius from the conventions and rules of classicism. He was exiled for four years due to his political radicalism.

5 Ibid, 54.

6 "ett filisträst frisinne, som förlorat eller ännu icke mognat till den varma ömheten för sak och rätt." Larsson, 55.

7 Larsson, 53.

8 For a thought-provoking analysis of the Taylorization of academic research and scholarship, see Ylva Hasselberg, "Ytlandet. Det professionella omdömet.", forthcoming in *Take back the science! En stridskrift*, (Uppsala 2007).

9 Ortega y Gasset, *Mission of the University*, trans. H. L. Nostrand, (London, 1946), 43.

10 George Santayana, *The life of reason or the phases of human progress: Reason in common sense*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1924) 284.

11 Immanuel Kant (1781, 1787), *Critique of pure reason*, trans. N.K. Smith (1929; New York, 1965); A xv–xvi. Original italics.

12 Ibid. A836/B864. Original italics.

13 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian meditations*, trans. Dorian Cairns (1931; Dordrecht & Boston, 1960), §2, 46.

14 In Tredennick's translation of 1004b 25: "Dialectic treats as an exercise what philosophy tries to understand, and sophistry seems to be philosophy, but is not." Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. H. Tredennick (Cambridge, 1980).

15 See, for example, T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent", in *The sacred wood: Essays on poetry and criticism* (New York, 1921), H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and method* (1965; New York, 1975), R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (1939; Oxford, 1978).

16 Compare with Kant's discussion of "The discipline of pure reason in respect of its polemical employment", especially regarding academic teaching (A754/B782–A755/B783).

17 Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation", in From Max Weber: *Essays in Sociology*, trans. & ed. H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (1919; New York, 1946), 129–156.

18 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (1886; New York 1973), "On the Prejudices of the Philosophers" §19.

19 That Larsson was a farmer's son, for example, may well have contributed to his psychological make-up to the extent he was never fully at home in the academy. But this fact is only relevant once we have already recognized something about the character of his thinking that we then try to explain biographically or psychologically. The philosophically relevant matter is just this character, and not speculations as to how it developed.

20 It may be argued that, given my portrayal of philosophy as by nature heterodox, it is reasonable to assume that many thinkers had good reason, as human beings, to write in such a way as to avoid persecution by state and religious authority. Surely there is something to Strauss' famous dictum: "The silence of a wise man is always meaningful." (Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago 1958, 30). At the same time, the idea that the esoteric text forces the reader to do their own thinking and learning need not be tied to the political dimension.

21 Michel Foucault, letter to Professor Sten Lindroth, cited in Didier Erebon, *Michel Foucault*, Paris 1991), 106. ("J'ai eu tort de ne pas définir mon projet qui n'est pas décrire une histoire des développements de la science psychiatrique. Mais plutôt une histoire du contexte social, moral et imaginaire dans lequel sést développée.")

22 Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique: Folie et déraison* (Paris 1961). Abridged English edition published as *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason*, trans. R. Howard (London 1965).

23 Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, in *Zukunftsphilologie! En erwidrung aug Friedrich Nietzsches "Geburt der Tragödie"* (1872), in *Der Streit um Nietzsches "Geburt der Tragödie"* (Hildesheim: Georg Holms, 1969),

31. **In the preface to 1886 edition, the mature** Nietzsche is inclined to agree with this evaluation of his book, although, in part, for different reasons. He calls his youthful work "an impossible book", "badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, sentimental, in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy, uneven in tempo, without the will to logical cleanliness, very convinced and therefore disdainful of proof, mistrustful even of the propriety of proof." Friedrich Nietzsche, "Attempt at a self-criticism", in *Basic writings of Nietzsche,* trans. W. Kaufmann (New York 1966), 19.

24 Willamowitz (1969), 55.

25 Nietzsche (1966), 18. Original italics.

26 Sören Stenlund's approach to philosophy and its history, such as his essay on Descartes, has been an important source of inspiration for this paper. (Sören Stenlund, "Descartes metod", in *Filosofiska uppsatser*, Skellefteå 2000).