

WITTGENSTEIN | HANS-JOHANN AND HISTORY | GLOCK

I. Wittgenstein and history

Many contemporary analytic philosophers feel that Wittgenstein *is* history, or at least that he should be. And his place in the history of Western thought has of course been widely discussed by scholars.¹ But Wittgenstein's own attitude to history is not a topic which is either obvious or popular. To the best of my knowledge, fortified by an examination of existing bibliographies,² there is no explicit discussion of it. This is no coincidence. Obviously, unlike the nature of logic, language and the human mind, history is not a topic that looms large in Wittgenstein's writings, whether it be the *Tractatus*, the *Philosophical Investigations* or the posthumous publications from the *Nachlass*. Unlike ethics, religion and aesthetics, moreover, it is not even a topic that he broached explicitly in lectures and conversations.

Nevertheless, there are a few scattered remarks. And there is also a certain amount of biographical evidence. In this essay I attempt to exploit these meagre resources in order to discuss and assess Wittgenstein's own thinking about history – both the history of philosophy and history in general – and

1. Recently, e.g. Hacker, P.M.S. 1996, *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers), and Stroll, A. 2000, *Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press).
2. Shanker, V.A. and S.G. Shanker 1986, *A Wittgenstein Bibliography* (London: Croom Helm); Frongia, G. and B. McGuinness 1980, *Wittgenstein: A Bibliographical Guide* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers).

A. Pichler, S. Säätelä (eds.), *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works*, pp. 277–303, Frankfurt a.M.: ontos verlag 2006, © ontos verlag, Hans-Johann Glock.

about historical modes of thought. The occasion for such an attempt is provided by the fact that these topics have recently acquired a new importance in the debate about the nature of philosophy in general and of analytic philosophy in particular. In section 2 of this paper I introduce what one might call the historicist challenge to analytic philosophy, and distinguish different varieties of historicism. In section 3, I critically discuss Wittgenstein's attitude to the history of philosophy and its connections to the positions of other thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, the logical positivists, Ryle and Quine. While Wittgenstein himself was indifferent or hostile to historical scholarship, he has inspired several historicists. For this reason section 4 briefly considers the question of whether Wittgenstein's reflections on other topics such as language or the nature of philosophy willy-nilly support historicism, either directly or indirectly. The final section turns from the history of philosophy to history in general. It compares and contrasts Wittgenstein's account of conceptual investigations with the genetic method derived from Nietzsche and recently promoted by Bernard Williams, according to which proper philosophy needs to take account of the historical development of our conceptual scheme.

2. Varieties of historicism

Lack of historical awareness is one of the prime accusations that continue to be levelled against analytic philosophy. It unites its two main rivals within contemporary Western philosophy. While so-called continental philosophy is an avant-garde movement that draws on post-Kantian thinkers from the European mainland, what one might call traditional philosophy devotes itself to the historical and philological study of the *philosophia perennis* ranging from the ancients to Kant. More surprisingly, perhaps, the criticism is also shared by some who by common consent are analytic philosophers themselves.

From a continental perspective, Rorty accuses analytic philosophy of being 'an attempt to escape from history',³ and of working against historical self-consciousness.⁴ From a traditionalist perspective, Ayers has devoted an

3. Rorty, R. 1979, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 8–9.

article to lambasting analytic philosophy for its alleged historiographical failings.⁵ Combining both, Réé complains about the ‘condescension’ towards the past and the unhistorical idea of timeless philosophical positions.⁶ The analytic critics, finally, include historians of the analytic movement like Sluga,⁷ Baker⁸ and Hylton,⁹ who deplore its lack of historical self-consciousness, but also Bernard Williams, who has urged analytic philosophy to adopt a more historical and genetic perspective in general.¹⁰

For the purposes of this article I shall use the label ‘historicism’ for any position which promotes historical thinking in philosophy and warns against ignoring or distorting the past. According to Plato, ‘the truth is known only to the forefathers’ (*Phaedrus* 274c).¹¹ Echoes of this attitude are audible in certain traditionalists, who convey the impression of being irked by the suggestion that some of their contemporaries might see further philosophically than the giants of yore.¹² Aristotle was far less pious than Plato. Yet even he insisted:

4. Rorty, R., J.B. Schneewind and Q. Skinner 1984, ‘Introduction’, in Rorty, R., J.B. Schneewind and Q. Skinner 1984 (eds.), *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge: CUP), pp. 1–14; p. 11.
5. Ayers, M. 1978, ‘Analytical Philosophy and the History of Philosophy’, in Réé, J., M. Ayers and A. Westoby 1978, *Philosophy and Its Past* (Hassocks: Harvester), pp. 42–66.
6. Réé, J. 1978, ‘Philosophy and the History of Philosophy’, in Réé/Ayers/Westoby 1978: pp. 1–38; p. 28.
7. Sluga, H. 1980, *Frege* (London: Routledge), p. 2.
8. Baker, G.P. 1988, *Wittgenstein, Frege and the Vienna Circle* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers), p. ix.
9. Hylton, P. 1992, *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon), p. vii.
10. Williams, B. 2002a, ‘Why Philosophy needs History’, *London Review of Books* 17 October, pp. 7–9; Williams, B. 2002, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton U.P.).
11. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to published works by Wittgenstein are to latest revised editions. I have provided my own translations wherever appropriate. References to the giants of yore follow established systems.
12. E.g. Ayers 1978: p. 60 and MacIntyre, A. 1984, ‘The Relation of Philosophy to Its Past’, in Rorty/Schneewind/Skinner 1984: pp. 31–48; pp. 35–38.

For our study of the soul it is necessary, when formulating the problems of which in our further advance we are to find the solutions, to summon the opinions of our predecessors, so that we may profit by whatever is sound in their suggestions and avoid their errors (*On the Soul* I.2, 403b20).

Some historicists are wont to make stronger claims. According to Taylor ‘philosophy and the history of philosophy are one. You cannot do the first without also doing the second’.¹³ In the same vein Krüger assures us that ‘philosophy is *essentially* of an historical nature’. The reason for studying its history is not just the ‘pragmatic’ one of ‘studying historical material in order to produce trans-historical philosophical insight’, since the only philosophical insight to be had is itself historical in nature.¹⁴ This *intrinsic* or *strong* historicism has to be distinguished from an *instrumental* or *moderate* historicism. According to Aristotle, studying predecessors is necessary, but only as *means* to an ulterior end, namely to advance the solution of substantive problems. The passage even seems to leave open the possibility that such insights are achievable by other means, even though in that case we forsake the benefit of learning from the achievements and mistakes of the past. On such a view, a study of the past is *useful* to philosophy, without being indispensable. If it is historicist at all, then only in an etiolated, *minimalist* sense.

Failure to distinguish these positions has muddied the waters in recent debates. Thus the popular term ‘doing philosophy historically’ has been used indiscriminately for positions ranging from the minimalist thesis that philosophy and history of philosophy *can* enrich each other,¹⁵ through the moderate thesis that history of philosophy is an indispensable means, to the strong thesis that it is intrinsic to the mission of philosophy.¹⁶

13. Taylor, C. 1984, ‘Philosophy and its history’, in Rorty et al. 1984: pp. 17–30; p. 17.
14. Krüger, L. 1984, ‘Why do we study the history of philosophy’, in Rorty et al. 1984: pp. 77–102; p. 79+n. Similarly Rée 1978: p. 30; Baker 1988: p. xv.
15. Hare, P. 1988, ‘Introduction’, in P. Hare (ed.) 1988, *Doing Philosophy Historically* (Buffalo: Prometheus), p. 14.
16. Piercy, R. 2003, ‘Doing Philosophy Historically’, *Review of Metaphysics* 56, pp. 779–800; pp. 798–99.

Even minimal historicists, however, have attacked analytic philosophy. One can distinguish three historicist criticisms. The first is that analytic philosophers simply *ignore* the history of the subject – the charge of *historiophobia*. The second is that in so far as they consider the past, they *distort* it, by reading features of the present into it – the charge of *anachronism*. The third complaint is not confined to the history of philosophy; it is that analytic philosophy adopts an unduly *anti-genetic* attitude towards the concepts and theories with which it grapples.

As regards Wittgenstein, the second charge is not much of an issue. Admittedly, even in the writings he himself authorized for publication – principally the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* – he commented on thinkers ranging from Plato through James and Frege to Russell. And of course one can legitimately ask whether these comments faithfully reflect the claims to which he refers. More intriguingly, there is even a question as to whether Wittgenstein was always accurate in presenting his own earlier positions. Perhaps it is ‘the Ghost of the *Tractatus*’ rather than the work itself which provides the target of some of his later self-criticisms,¹⁷ or perhaps the later Wittgenstein was just very adept at extracting the important fundamentals of his earlier views.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Wittgenstein’s comments on either his own work or that of others are extremely rare by the standards of twentieth century philosophy. Furthermore, as will become all too obvious in the sequel, he never pretended to engage in exegetical or historical scholarship of any kind. This by itself, however, is a point worth noting. Leading contemporary historicists like Rorty, Baker, Sluga, and Hylton have been influenced by Wittgenstein either directly or indirectly. Wittgenstein himself, by contrast, can be and has been accused of historiophobia. In the next two sections I shall explore the two sides of this tension.

17. Kenny, A.J.P. 1974, ‘The Ghost of the *Tractatus*’, in G. Vesey (ed.) 1974, *Understanding Wittgenstein* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), pp. 1–13.

18. Hacker, P.M.S. 1975, ‘Laying the Ghost of the *Tractatus*’, *Review of Metaphysics* 29, pp. 96–116.

3. Wittgenstein and the history of philosophy

Analytic philosophers invite the charge of historiophobia in that they have often prided themselves on the ahistorical nature of their enterprise. To the analytic enemies of metaphysics the history of philosophy tended to appear primarily as a history of nonsense or mistakes. Wittgenstein had a leading role in this development.

Many philosophers of the past have disparaged the theories of their predecessors as false, unfounded or pointless. Wittgenstein seems to have been the first major thinker to accuse past philosophy of suffering from a more basic defect, namely that of being linguistically nonsensical.¹⁹ According to the *Tractatus*, ‘the whole of philosophy’ is ‘full of the most fundamental confusions’ and ‘errors’ (*TLP* 3.324f.). It is not just that metaphysical problems or theories provide wrong answers, but that the questions they address are misguided questions to begin with. They are based on a misunderstanding or distortion of the logical syntax of language, and must hence be rejected.

Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Therefore we cannot answer questions of this kind at all, but can only note their nonsensicality. Most of the questions and propositions by philosophers arise, because we do not understand the logic of our language. (They are of the same kind as the question of whether the Good is more or less identical than the Beautiful.) (*TLP* 4.003)

The problems of metaphysics are misguided, and the attempt to answer them leads to ‘nonsensical pseudo-propositions’ (*TLP* 4.1272, see also *TLP* 5.534–5). The task of legitimate philosophy is not to answer these questions, but to show through ‘a critique of language’ that both the questions and the answers violate the bounds of sense. Indeed, the pronouncements of the *Tractatus* itself are in the end condemned as nonsensical, because they

19. In his earliest discussion Wittgenstein had claimed that philosophy consists of logic (its basis) and metaphysics, and that it differs from science in being the ‘doctrine of the logical form of scientific propositions’ (*NL* p. 106). Thereafter, however, he applies the label ‘metaphysics’ exclusively to the illegitimate philosophy of the past.

attempt to ‘say what can only be shown’, notably the essence of representation (*TLP* 4.0031, 6.53–7).

Thus the *Tractatus* ended up directing the charge of nonsense even-handedly at all philosophical doctrines, its own included. By contrast, Wittgenstein’s disciples in the Vienna Circle confined the charge to thinkers other than themselves. They focused especially on post-Kantian German philosophy – German idealism, vitalism and Heidegger.²⁰ All of metaphysics, however, traditional as well as avant-garde, was in the target area, and so was moral philosophy. These disciplines consisted of nonsensical ‘pseudo-propositions’, misguided attempts to answer vacuous ‘pseudo-questions’ or ‘pseudo-problems’.

In the domain of *metaphysics*, including all philosophy of value and normative theory, logical analysis yields the negative result that the *alleged statements in this area are entirely meaningless*. ... Our thesis, now, is that logical analysis reveals the alleged statements of metaphysics to be pseudo-statements.²¹

Some logical positivists tried to soften the blow of declaring metaphysics meaningless by insisting that some of the great figures of the past – notably Berkeley and Hume – were not essentially metaphysicians.²² But even when it was conceded that the ‘forefathers’ achieved insights, it was generally held that these could be discovered quite independently.

This general attitude persisted within analytic philosophy even after the demise of logical positivism. Unlike traditional philosophy, the predominant feeling was, analytic philosophy is a scientific discipline; it uses specific techniques to tackle discrete problems with definite results, and hence no more needs to seek refuge in discussing the past than natural science. Thus Quine

20. Carnap, R. 1963, ‘Intellectual Autobiography’, in P.A. Schilpp (ed.) 1963, *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* (La Salle: Open Court), p. 875.
21. Carnap, R. 1932, ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through the Logical Analysis of Language’, in A.J. Ayer (ed.) 1932, *Logical Positivism*, Glencoe: Free Press, pp. 60–81; pp. 60–61. See also Carnap, R. 1934, ‘On the Character of Philosophical Problems’, reprinted in R. Rorty (ed.) 1967, *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 54–62; p. 59.
22. E.g. Ayer, A.J. 1971, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), ch. 2.

dismisses exegetical worries about a remark of his on Aristotle by adding ‘subject to contradictions by scholars, such being the penalty for attributions to Aristotle’.²³ And he is credited with the quip:

There are two kinds of people interested in philosophy, those interested in philosophy and those interested in the history of philosophy (MacIntyre 1984: pp. 39–40).

Finally, Williams reports:

in one prestigious American department a senior figure had a notice on his door that read JUST SAY NO TO THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY.²⁴

These historiophobes rely on two premises. The first is the naturalistic claim that proper philosophy is part of or continuous with the natural sciences, and should therefore emulate the latter’s aims and methods. The second premise is that natural science is a thoroughly ahistorical enterprise. As Whitehead put it: ‘A science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost’.²⁵ Scientific investigations rarely proceed by arguing with the great dead like Galileo or Newton. For the same reason, students of the natural sciences are not introduced to their subjects through their history.

This *naturalistic historiophobia* is anathema to Wittgenstein. As is well known, and as we shall have occasion to stress in the next section, he vigorously and persistently disagreed with the first premise, the assimilation of philosophy to science. Nevertheless, like the naturalistic historiophobes, Wittgenstein was entirely immune to the charms of historical scholarship. He seems to have cultivated an image of being singularly ill-read in the history of philosophy. Furthermore, he wrote:

23. Quine, W.V.O. 1960, *Word and Object* (MIT Press), p. 199.

24. Williams, B. 1996, ‘On Hating and Despising Philosophy’, *London Review of Books* 18 April, pp. 17–18; p. 18. The culprit turns out to be Gilbert Harman. See T. Sorell ‘On Saying No to History of Philosophy’, in T. Sorell and G.A.J. Rogers (eds.) 2005, *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy* (Oxford: O.U.P.), pp. 43–59.

25. Whitehead, A.N. 1929, *The Aims of Education* (New York: Mentor Books), p. 107.

As little philosophy as I have read, I have certainly not read too little, *rather too much*. I see that whenever I read a philosophical book: it doesn't improve my thoughts at all, it makes them worse.²⁶

Even though many of them were influenced by Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, on this issue conceptual analysts from Oxford took a starkly different line. In his concise intellectual biography Ryle writes: 'My interest was in the theory of Meanings – horrid substantive – and quite soon, I am glad to say, in the theory of its senior partner, Nonsense'. Later, however, he recognized 'that the Viennese dichotomy "Either Science or Nonsense" had too few "ors" in it'. This in turn made him realise first that figures of the past had, 'sometimes said significant things', and eventually to regard them 'more like colleagues than like pupils'.²⁷

By contrast, in the meetings of the Moral Sciences Club at Cambridge during the 1930s 'veneration for Wittgenstein was so incontinent that mentions, for example my mentions, of other philosophers were greeted with jeers. ... This contempt for thoughts other than Wittgenstein's seemed to me pedagogically disastrous for the students and unhealthy for Wittgenstein himself'. Ryle also suggests that the disciples did not misinterpret the master on this score:

Wittgenstein himself not only properly distinguished philosophical from exegetic problems but also, less properly, gave the impression, first, that he himself was proud not to have studied other philosophers – which he had done, though not much – and second, that he thought that people who did study them were academic and therefore unauthentic philosophers, which was often but not always true (Ryle 1971: p. 11).

Ryle strikes the right balance here between the Scylla of fetishizing authenticity and the Charybdis of fetishizing ancient texts. The question is whether Wittgenstein veered too close to the former. In his defence it might be said that he did not reject the study of other philosophers. Instead,

26. MS 135: 27.7.1947; quoted in Monk, R. 1990, Wittgenstein: *The Duty of Genius* (London: Cape), p. 495.

27. Ryle, G. 1971, 'Autobiographical', in O.P. Wood and G. Pitcher (eds.) 1971, *Ryle* (London: Macmillan), pp. 7, 10.

he merely avoided it himself, because he felt it to be inimical to his own inventiveness.

There is no decisive reason for rejecting this explanation of Wittgenstein's historical abstinence. But there are indications that something more substantial and potentially sinister might be afoot. Through Weininger, Wittgenstein had imbibed the pernicious cult of genius (see Monk 1990: pp. 19–25). Probably as a result of Weininger's influence he worried in a rather worrying fashion not just about his own creative powers but also about those of Jews in general (see *CV* pp. 18–9). Furthermore, among the few thinkers that influenced Wittgenstein, several had strong anti-historicist tendencies. They include not just Schopenhauer and Frege, of whom more below, but also Nietzsche. This claim may come as a surprise to those like Williams who think of Nietzsche as the progenitor of genealogy (see section 5). But *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* is an eloquent attack on nineteenth century historicism. It urges that knowledge of the past is to be avoided in so far as it hinders rather than expedites 'life', the pursuit of the interests of the present. In Wittgenstein's case, these interests would be mainly of an intellectual kind. Nevertheless, there are clear echoes of both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in his youthful exclamation: 'What is history to me. Mine is the first and only world!' (NB 2.9.1916). It remains possible, therefore, to suspect Wittgenstein of *existentialist* historiophobia. His avoidance of past philosophy seems to have been fuelled at least partly by his well-documented contempt for academic philosophy and by an urge to philosophize off his own bat, without the dead hand of history.

Wittgenstein's relationship to *positivistic historiophobia* is also more complex than is commonly accepted. The logical positivists regarded metaphysics as theology in disguise, and hence as an expression of superstition or misguided artistic impulse. In truly Teutonic fashion, they fancied themselves in the role of 'storm-troopers of the anti-metaphysical and resolutely scientific school of research'.²⁸ In their crusade against metaphysics, our Viennese storm-troopers wielded three devastating weapons: Russellian logic, the *Tractatus* claim that all necessity is tautological, and the verifi-

28. Frank, P. 1935, 'Die Prager Vorkonferenz 1934', *Erkenntnis* 5, pp. 3–5; p. 4.

cationist criterion of meaningfulness they derived from their conversations with Wittgenstein (see *WVC* pp. 47–58).

Yet, in spite of his designated role as a supplier of arms, Wittgenstein disapproved of the war on metaphysics waged in his name. He criticized the logical positivists on the (justified) grounds that ‘there was nothing new about abolishing metaphysics’.²⁹ In conversations with members of the Vienna Circle, moreover, he not only defended Schopenhauer against the attacks of Schlick, but even feigned to understand what Heidegger means by *Sein* and *Angst* (Carnap 1963: pp. 26–7; *WVC* p. 68).

As regards metaphysics, the saying/showing distinction indeed separated Wittgenstein from the logical positivists. The *Tractatus* had maintained that there are metaphysical truths about the essential structure which language and the world must share, while at the same time maintaining that these truths are ineffable. In his later work, however, Wittgenstein abandoned the idiosyncratic idea of an ineffable metaphysics, yet without reinstating the more venerable project of effable metaphysics.³⁰ Rumours to the contrary notwithstanding, Wittgenstein did not soften his stance on metaphysics.

He continued to portray his work as a radical break with the past. Thus he described his new way of philosophizing as ‘one of the heirs of what used to be called “philosophy”’ (*BB* pp. 27–8). During lectures in the early thirties he seems to have made even grander claims. He insisted that his philosophizing was not merely a stage in the evolution of philosophy, but rather a ‘new subject’. And he described its emergence as a ‘kink’ in the ‘development of human thought’, akin to Galileo’s introduction of mechanist physics. Furthermore, he even noted the technocratic implications of his analytic or therapeutic conception of philosophy, though, by contrast to the logical positivists, he occasionally intimates a sense of regret. The ‘nimbus of philosophy has been lost’, because the new method for the first time makes room for ‘skilful’ philosophers, where previously there had only been ‘great’ ones (*LWL* p. 21; *MWL* p. 113).³¹ In a conversation with Drury he maintained:³²

29. Letter to Waismann, July 1929; quoted in Nedo, M. and Ranchetti, M. 1983, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: sein Leben in Bildern und Texten* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp), p. 243.
30. See Glock, H.J. 1996, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 330–6; Hacker, P.M.S. 2001, *Wittgenstein – Connections and Controversies* (Oxford: OUP), chs 4–5.

Yes, I have reached a real resting place. I know that my method is right. My father was a business man, and I am a business man: I want my philosophy to get something done, to get something settled (*CMD* 1984: p. 110).

In a footnote Drury adds:

Years later Wittgenstein said to me: ‘You know I said I can stop doing philosophy when I like. That is a lie! I *can’t*.’ (*CMD* 1984: p. 219).

Nevertheless, the *ambition* to reach this resting place remained, as is evident from the *Investigations*. ‘The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to’ (*PI* § 133). And this is once more to be achieved by attaining a piecemeal method capable of solving or dissolving problems.

The anti-metaphysical trajectory of the new method is no less pronounced.

The essence of metaphysics: that it obfuscates the difference between factual and conceptual issues (*Z* § 458).

Metaphysical theories, Wittgenstein opines, are ‘houses of cards’ erected on linguistic confusions. They need to be torn down by bringing ‘words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’, i.e. by reminding us of the way in which words are used in non-philosophical discourse.

The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and bumps, which the understanding sustained by running its head up against the limits of language (*PI* §§ 116–119).

To be sure, Wittgenstein also cautioned:

In a certain sense one cannot treat philosophical errors too cautiously, they contain so much truth (*Z* § 460).

31. References to Moore’s lecture notes are to the edition in *Philosophical Occasions* (1993).
32. Drury, M.O’C. 1984, “Conversations with Wittgenstein”, in Rhees, R. 1984 (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), pp. 97–171, 218–225.

Furthermore, he divulged to Drury: 'Don't think I despise metaphysics. I regard some of the great philosophical systems of the past as among the noblest productions of the human mind. For some people it would require a heroic effort to give up this sort of writing' (*CMD* 1984: p. 105).

But again, it is clear that this is precisely the kind of effort Wittgenstein urges us to undertake. It is the 'work on the will' which he regarded as a precondition for ridding ourselves of philosophical confusion (Big Type-script p. 407). Moreover, the admission that the philosophical systems of the past are great and noble creations which have to be treated with respect, partly, though not exclusively, because they contain kernels of truth, is what one finds among the more diligent and temperate positivists, such as Carnap, Schlick and Ayer.

4. Wittgenstein and historicism

As we have seen, Wittgenstein's attitude towards the study of past philosophers ranged from indifference to hostility. Furthermore, this was not just a personal idiosyncrasy, but in line with his striving for authenticity and with his rejection of metaphysics, or so I have argued. Nevertheless, this is no bar to the possibility that certain aspects of his work might actually support historicist lines of thought. It is certainly striking to note that several historicist thinkers have been influenced by Wittgenstein.

Arguably the most important of these are Kuhn and Feyerabend. In conjunction, they turned the philosophy of science from the ahistorical positivist enterprise into one which cannot afford to ignore the history of science. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Kuhn only mentions Wittgenstein once.³³ But in his later years he has divulged the extent to which he was indirectly indebted to Wittgenstein.³⁴ Wittgenstein's idea that words have meaning by virtue of being used within language-games helped to shape

- 33. Kuhn, T. 1970, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 44–45. I am grateful to Vasso Kindi for alerting me to this passage.
- 34. Baltas, A., K. Gavroglou and V. Kindi 2000, 'A Discussion with Thomas S. Kuhn', in Kuhn, T. 2000, *The Road since Structure: Philosophical Essays since 1970 with an Autobiographical Essay*, ed. J. Conant and J. Haugeland (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 255–323.

Kuhn's claim that the meaning of scientific terms is fixed at least partly by the role they play within different 'scientific paradigms'. Feyerabend discussed Wittgenstein explicitly. Whether by interpretation or misinterpretation, moreover, this turned out to be one of the major inputs into his work, which also draws on the claim that the meaning of expressions depends on the role or function they are used to perform.³⁵ Both Kuhn and Feyerabend take over from Wittgenstein the general idea that meaning depends on practices that are subject to historical change.

Some philosophers have used Kuhn, in particular, to argue for a strong historicism concerning both science *and* philosophy. They accept the first premise of the aforementioned argument behind naturalistic historiophobia, the claim that philosophy is on a par with the natural sciences as regards the relation to its own history, while rejecting the second, the idea that science itself is ahistorical. Thus MacIntyre starts out from the claim that 'the history of natural science is in a way sovereign over the natural sciences' and infers that the history of philosophy 'is sovereign over the rest of the discipline' (MacIntyre 1984: pp. 44, 47; see also Krüger 1984).

Elsewhere I argue that this strong historicist claim about science is mistaken even if one accepts a Kuhnian conception of science, and that the inference to a strong historicism about philosophy is fallacious.³⁶ In the present context, it may also be noted that Wittgenstein would of course be hostile to any assimilation of philosophy to science.

On this he would be supported by most historicists. A majority of them contest the second premise of the naturalistic argument, the identity of philosophy and natural science. Indeed, the preferred route to historicism has been to align philosophy with the humanities and social sciences rather than the natural sciences. Thus for Gadamer³⁷ philosophy is hermeneutics, an investigation of the method of interpretation, because the fundamental structures and limits of human existence are determined by the interpreta-

35. See Preston, J. 1996, *Feyerabend: Philosophy, Science and Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press).

36. See Glock, H.J. forthcoming 2007, *What is Analytic Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), ch. 4.

37. Gadamer, H.G. 1960, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr).

tion of meaningful actions and their products. Philosophy turns into a dialogue with texts and with the history of their effects. One of the historical blind spots of analytic philosophers is supposed to be that they are oblivious to our need to situate ourselves in the Gadamerian ‘conversation which we are’ (Rorty et al. 1984: p. 11). There is no denying the fact that the cultural sciences are inherently historical, since they describe and explain evolving human practices and their products. *If* philosophy is simply one of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, it is inherently historical.

Wittgenstein is sometimes associated with the idea of philosophy as a ‘humanistic discipline’ (Stroll 2000: pp. 1–2, 267–70; see also Hacker 2001: ch. 2). There is a lot of justice in this picture. Wittgenstein not only rejects the naturalistic conception of philosophy as natural science, but also insists that it involves an understanding of linguistic rules and practices which is akin to the *Verstehen* of the cultural and social sciences. But it would be precipitate to conclude that Wittgenstein’s work points towards a hermeneutic historicism, his personal historiophobia notwithstanding.

For assimilating philosophy to either the natural or the cultural sciences does not exhaust the options. Traditionally philosophy, like logic and mathematics, has been regarded as *a priori*, independent of sensory experience. Its problems cannot be solved, its propositions cannot be supported or refuted, simply by appealing to either everyday observation or scientific experiments, irrespective of whether these concern the natural world or human culture. Though often derided at present, this rationalist picture squares well with the actual practice of philosophers, naturalists included. In most if not all cases the real disputes are over the relevance that scientific findings have for the philosophical problems. Alas, this lesson applies to the cultural sciences with a vengeance. If neuroscience by itself does not solve the mind-body problem, for instance, sociology and history will be completely out of their depths. There is no reason why the empirical findings of these disciplines should possess greater philosophical potency than those of the natural sciences.

Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy shares more with the rationalist picture than with hermeneutic historicism. He does not maintain that the aim of philosophy is to provide a historical understanding of evolving human practices, and he would be even more hostile to the idea that it is to

furnish an exegetical understanding of philosophical texts. Rather, the fundamental aim of philosophy is to *solve philosophical problems*.

A tradition going back to Plato locates the source of philosophy in wonder and astonishment (*PLP* p. 6). This idea lies behind the way in which Wittgenstein approaches philosophy. He speaks of it as an array of “confusions” (*TLP* 3.324), “puzzlement” or “puzzles” (*LWL* p. 1), “agitation” (*Big Typescript* p. 416) and “disquiet” (*Z* § 447; *Big Typescript* p. 431). The subject is primarily not a set of answers or a history of competing theories, but the realm of a mysterious sort of question.

For philosophy isn’t anything except philosophical problems, the particular individual worries that we call “philosophical problems” (*PG* p. 193).

The common task which different ways of philosophizing aspire to fulfil is to deal with these problems in an adequate way. Out of the idea of philosophy as an array of problems arises the idea of philosophy as the activity of handling these problems (*TLP* 4.112, 6.63). Philosophy turns into a *problem-solving activity*:

Philosophy is the attempt to be rid of a particular kind of puzzlement (*LWL* p. 1).

I conceive of philosophy as an activity of clearing up thought (*AWL* p. 225).

Thoughts that are at peace. That’s what someone who philosophizes yearns for (*CV* p. 43).

Why do I wish to call our present activity philosophy, when we also call Plato’s activity philosophy? Perhaps because of a certain analogy between them, or perhaps because of the continuous development of the subject. Or the new activity may take the place of the old one because it removes mental discomforts the old was supposed to (*AWL* p. 27f.).

Wittgenstein promotes his ‘new method’ as a superior strategy for resolving philosophical problems, which for him are the problems of *theoretical philosophy* (logic, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind).

At the same time, Wittgenstein shares with the rationalist picture the conviction that these problems are *a priori*. He illustrates their peculiar

nature by reference to Augustine's question 'What is time?'. They are *a priori*, because they cannot be solved by empirical observation or scientific experiment (*AWL* p. 3, see pp. 97, 205; *LWL* pp. 79–80). Furthermore, their intractable character is itself enigmatic, since they concern not the arcane, but concepts we are familiar with in non-philosophical (everyday and specialized) discourse; indeed, understanding these concepts is a precondition for establishing new empirical facts (*PI* § 89; see §§ 95, 428; *BB* pp. 30–1; Big Typescript p. 435; *RPP* II § 289; *Z* § 452; *CV* p. 4). For similar reasons, Wittgenstein argues powerfully against the attempt to reduce the necessary propositions of logic, mathematics and metaphysics to empirical generalizations.³⁸ He has often been accused of engaging in *a priori armchair science*, but would respond that it is scientistic/naturalistic philosophers who engage in an incoherent discipline – *empirical metaphysics*.

This consensus between Wittgenstein and the rationalist picture has important repercussions for our current topic. For the rationalist picture provides its own rationale for being cautious about the philosophical relevance of history. It implies that philosophy depends essentially on rational reflection about atemporal concepts and logical structures rather than on empirical historical studies. In this spirit Kant wrote:

There are scholars to whom the history of philosophy is itself their philosophy; the present Prolegomena are not written for them. They will have to wait until those who endeavour to draw from the fountain of reason have finished their business, and thereupon it will be their turn to apprise the world of what happened.³⁹

For Kant's admirer Schopenhauer, historical studies represented the very opposite of true philosophy, since they are by nature unsystematic and incapable of going beyond mere appearances:

38. See Glock, H.J. 1996a, 'Necessity and Normativity', in H. Sluga and D. Stern (eds.) 1996, *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* (CUP).

39. *Prolegomena*, Preface, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften* Akademie Ausgabe (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900–), Vol. IV, p. 255; my translation.

history has always been a favourite study among those who want to learn something without undergoing the effort required by the real branches of knowledge, which tax and engross the intellect.⁴⁰

There is also a distinctively Kantian tradition within analytic philosophy. It shares both the view that philosophy differs from all empirical disciplines and the reservations about the relevance of historical issues. Kant's distinction between *quaestio facti* and *quaestio iuris* and the ensuing neo-Kantian distinction between genesis and validity fuelled a pervasive, if largely implicit, suspicion of the so-called 'genetic fallacy', the mistake of deducing claims about the *validity* of a theory or the *nature* of a concept from information about its historical origins, including information about the causes that led to its emergence. Thus Frege granted that 'the historical perspective' has a certain justification, while insisting that one cannot divine the nature of numbers from psychological investigations into the way in which our thinking about numbers evolved.⁴¹

Admittedly, in one respect rationalism points in the opposite direction. If philosophy is *a priori*, the philosophy of the past cannot simply be superseded by novel empirical findings and hence it may have something to teach us, just as minimalist historicism has it. In fact, Kant allows for this possibility. He only resists the view that history of philosophy is philosophy enough. This view was still powerful in the doxographic climate of the eighteenth century, and in a modified form it re-emerges in the strong historicists of the present.

Furthermore, Kant also willy-nilly provided an impetus for historicism. For Kant philosophy is *a priori* not because it describes immutable abstract entities or essences, but because it is not concerned with objects of any kind. Instead, it is a *second-order discipline* which reflects on the preconditions of experiencing ordinary objects, that is, on the conceptual structures that science and common sense presuppose in their empirical descriptions and explanations of reality.⁴² Kant treats this conceptual structure as an immut-

40. *Parerga und Parilepomena*, English translation E.F.J. Payne (OUP 1974), Vol. 2, p. 445.

41. Frege, G. 1884, *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (Breslau: Georg Olms; Neudruck Darmstadt, 1961), Intro.

able mental structure – ‘pure reason’. From Hegel onwards, however, it was recognized that our conceptual scheme can change, at least in parts. For Hegel ‘philosophy (is) its time apprehended in thought’ (*Philosophy of Rights*: Preface). It articulates and synthesizes the different branches of the culture of an epoch into a superior form of wisdom. Less ambitiously, according to Collingwood,⁴³ metaphysics spells out the ‘absolute presuppositions’ of the thought of an epoch, fundamental intellectual commitments that can only be brought out with the benefit of hindsight through historical reflection.

Wittgenstein blazed a different trail from Kant. He accepted that philosophical problems and propositions are *a priori* in that they have their root not in reality but in the conceptual scheme we use in describing reality. Unlike Kant, however, he regarded this conceptual scheme as essentially embodied in language. He came to recognize, moreover, that language is not the abstract logical system envisaged by the *Tractatus*, but rather a human practice and hence subject to historical change.⁴⁴ This is one of the lessons conveyed by his famous comparison of language to an ancient city (*PI* §18). And it is a lesson which leads Wittgenstein into discussions of conceptual change (*PI* §§ 79, 354; *Z* § 438).

The first moot question is whether this historical conception of language is mirrored by historicist elements in Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy. Some remarks portray not just individual philosophical problems but the whole philosophical enterprise as a cultural phenomenon that might disappear through historical changes (*RFM* p. 132; *CV* pp. 86–7). At the same time, Wittgenstein also tended to hold that most of the philosophically troublesome concepts and modes of thought are relatively stable.

Language contains the same traps for everyone; the immense network of well-kept //passable// false paths. ... One keeps hearing the remark that

42. See Glock, H.J. 1997, ‘Kant and Wittgenstein: Philosophy, Necessity and Representation’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 5.
43. Collingwood, R.G. 1940, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon).
44. In this he may have been swayed by Sraffa and Spengler. The latter, in particular, had strong historicist tendencies. Indeed, he explicitly condemned Schopenhauer’s contempt for history, while commanding him on his anti-intellectualism (Spengler, O. 1928, *The Decline of the West* (London: Unwin; 1. edn. 1923), Vol. I, ch. 5.1.2 & 5.2.10).

philosophy really makes no progress, that the same philosophical problems that had occupied the Greeks are still occupying us. But those who say that do not understand the reason it is //must be// so. The reason is that our language has remained the same and seduces us into asking the same questions over and over again. As long as there is a verb ‘to be’ which seems to function like ‘to eat’ and ‘to drink’, as long as there are adjectives like ‘identical’, ‘true’, ‘false’, ‘possible’, as long as one talks about a flow of time and an expanse of space, etc., etc., humans will continue to bump against the same mysterious difficulties, and stare at something that no explanation seems capable of removing (Big Typescript pp. 423–4).

5. Wittgenstein and genealogy

The second and even more important moot question is whether Wittgenstein’s historical account of language *should* lead to a more historicist understanding of philosophy. As we have seen, even the Kantian conception of the subject allows for minimal historicism. And both its Hegelian and its linguistic mutation seem to encourage a moderate and perhaps even a strong historicism. In fact, the most important contemporary historicists follow this trajectory. The underlying idea is that philosophy aims at a special kind of *self-understanding*, an understanding not so much of the non-human world as of our thoughts and practices. In the words of Williams:

The starting point of philosophy is that we do not understand ourselves well enough. ... Philosophy’s methods of helping us to understand ourselves involve reflecting on the concepts we use, the modes in which we think about these various things (nature, ethics, politics); and it sometimes proposes better ways of doing this (Williams 2002a: p. 7).

Similarly, for Charles Taylor, philosophy ‘involves a great deal of articulation of what is initially inarticulated’, namely the fundamental assumptions behind the way we think and act (Taylor 1984: p. 18).

Instead of Collingwood’s ‘absolute presuppositions’ let us use the more neutral ‘framework’ for the system of concepts, modes of thought and assumptions that underlie a given culture. As both Williams and Taylor recognize, the immediate philosophical task is to articulate *our current* framework, since the ‘concepts which give rise to the (philosophical) questions

are ours' (Williams 2002a: p. 7). Why then should philosophy require an understanding of the *past*?

The most important response to this challenge has it that philosophy can properly articulate our current framework only by taking account of its history. According to Williams, more baneful than the neglect of the history of philosophy has been the neglect of 'the history of the concepts which philosophy is trying to understand' (Williams 2002a: p. 7). This position underwrites a broader form of historicism, since it makes philosophy dependent not just on the history of *philosophy* but on the entire *history of ideas* and perhaps even on *history in general*, depending on the forces that shape our concepts. But how can it be sustained?

One suggestion is familiar from debates about the value of history of ideas. We can only articulate our world-view or framework if we recognize that there are alternatives to it. Knowing about the history of our current framework liberates us from regarding the latter as unavoidable. This is what Quentin Skinner has in mind when he writes that 'the indispensable value of studying the history of ideas' is to learn 'the distinction between what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own arrangements'.⁴⁵

If we are to understand our framework in a philosophically fruitful way it is indeed crucial to establish what aspects of it, if any, are indispensable and hence universal, rather than optional products of contingent circumstances. Otherwise we cannot assess, for instance, Strawson's contentious claim that 'there is a massive core of human thinking which has no history – or none recorded in histories of thought' because it is not subject to change.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the historicist argument runs into trouble. As regards the philosophical articulations, at least there was no doubt as to the existence of diversity. As regards the frameworks themselves, it is not even beyond dispute that there *are* genuine alternatives. Rationalists from Kant to Davidson have advanced intricate arguments to the effect that *au fond* we all share the same framework. Confronted with different epochs, these rationalists would insist that the alleged differences, for instance between us and the ancient

45. Skinner, Q. 1969, 'Meaning and Understanding in the – History of Ideas', *History and Theory* 8, pp. 3–53; pp. 52–3.

46. Strawson, P.F. 1959, *Individuals* (London: Methuen), p. 10.

Greeks, are merely superficial. If they are right, then the argument that philosophers need to be familiar with alternative frameworks from the past is a non-starter.

There are good reasons for resisting the rationalist attack on the possibility of alternative frameworks and for defending Wittgenstein's idea that there are alternative 'forms of representation'.⁴⁷ In that case, however, the historicist argument fails on other grounds. If the apparent diversity of human cultures cannot be dismissed as deceptive, then it is synchronic as well as diachronic. Our framework differs from that of the ancient Greeks; yet it also differs, for instance, from that of extant hunter-gatherers. Once more, synchronic diversity can take the place of diachronic diversity. History is only one source for appreciating that the status quo is optional, the other being *cultural anthropology*.

What is more, Wittgenstein and Quine have self-consciously raised the possibility of alternative frameworks by using *fictional* rather than actual anthropology. This may even seem to have the advantage that we can tailor the envisaged forms of speech and action to the philosophical problems under discussion. However, the philosophical merits of fictional anthropology depend crucially on what it is supposed to establish. Like hypothetical cases in general, it can help us to explore the conditions under which a concept can be legitimately applied. But when it comes to other projects there are notable hazards. Wittgenstein, for instance, is interested in 'the natural history of humankind', but not in actual history, 'since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes' (*PI* § 415; II, p. 230). The point that matters to him is that a change in contingent natural conditions would render plausible or useful concepts and practices other than our current ones, thereby dispelling the appearance that the latter are *metaphysically* necessary. Yet whether fictitious background conditions would favour equally fictitious practices depends, among other things, on human nature. And unlike history and cultural anthropology, fictional anthropology cannot help to establish whether our current practices are *humanly* necessary, dictated by our biological needs and capacities.

47. Dancy, R.M. 1983, 'Alien Concepts', *Synthese* 56, pp. 283–300; Hacker 1996; Glock 1996: pp. 48–50.

Williams relies on a different argument for the need to look at the history of the framework. According to him, in the case of scientific concepts like that of an atom the question whether the same or a different concept is employed in different epochs and cultures does not matter much to ‘what may puzzle us about that concept now (for much the same reason that the history of science is not part of science)’. Unfortunately, Williams does not divulge these reasons. Instead, he argues that the question does matter for some philosophically contested concepts, those that are intimately tied to human interaction and communication, like freedom, justice, truth and sincerity. In these cases it is essential, he insists, to appreciate that their historical variants represent ‘different interpretations’ of a ‘common core’. We may be able to understand that core through a functionalist reflection on the role these concepts fulfil in satisfying the demands of human life, as in the philosophical fictions of a ‘State of Nature’ which is supposed to explain the emergence of, for example, ethical values, language or the State. ‘But’, Williams continues, ‘the State of Nature story already implies that there must be a further, real and historically dense story to be told’. Therefore we need a Nietzschean ‘genealogy’, a ‘method that combines a representation of universal requirements through the fiction of a State of Nature with an account of real historical development’ (Williams 2002a: p. 7).

Finally, Williams characterizes a genealogy as a ‘narrative that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about’ (Williams 2002: p. 20). The inclusion of the last two disjuncts distances his genealogy from Nietzsche’s own, and assimilates it to a functional account, one which explains or justifies a phenomenon by pointing out that it serves a particular role in an actual or fictional practice.

There are both similarities and differences between such a genealogy and Wittgenstein’s ‘remarks on the natural history of human beings’ (*PI* § 415). The latter remind us of the framework within which our language-games take place and which give them their point. The label notwithstanding, they are no more part of natural science than Williams’ genealogy. Wittgenstein is concerned with anthropological rather than biological facts, with cultural activities rather than the genetic or physiological outfit. On the other hand, Wittgenstein qualifies the Kantian anti-geneticism he may have inherited from Frege, but without abandoning it.

Thus he claims that it is philosophically fruitful to investigate how a word is taught. But this is not because he is engaging in armchair learning theory (*LC* pp. 1–2; *Z* § 412). Wittgenstein argues that the mechanisms by which we are taught to speak are philosophically irrelevant, what matters is *what* is taught, and this can be revealed by looking at the process of learning (*LWL* p. 38; *BB* pp. 12–4; *PG* pp. 41, 66, 70). Similarly, Wittgenstein famously distinguishes ‘empirical propositions’ and ‘grammatical propositions’, sentences which are typically used to express a rule (e.g. *PI* §§ 251, 458; *AWL* pp. 31, 105–6; *RFM* p. 162). And his conception of a rule is a functional one. It is not based on linguistic form. Rules need not be in the imperative mood and a grammatical proposition need not be a meta-linguistic statement about how an expression is to be used. What counts is whether we *use* it as a standard of linguistic correctness. What does *not* count is how the rule or proposition was originally adopted. Thus Wittgenstein insists that whether someone follows rules depends on what he is *capable of doing*, not on how he acquired that ability, and he explicitly declared it to be logically possible that someone should be borne with the mastery of certain rules rather than having to acquire them through training and teaching (*PG* p. 188; *BB* pp. 12–14).

By contrast, Williams defends genealogy against the Kantian charge of a genetic fallacy. According to him this charge ‘overlooks the possibility that the value in question may understand itself and present itself and claim authority for itself in terms which the genealogical story can undermine’. Thus liberal conceptions of morality, ‘claimed to be the expression of a spirit that was higher, purer and more closely associated with reason, as well as transcending negative passions such as resentment’, and hence a genealogy is capable of displaying them as ‘self-deceived in this respect’ (Williams 2002a: pp. 7–9; see Williams 2002: pp. 20–40, 224–6).

If Williams is right, one reason why history is essential to philosophy is that the genesis of certain concepts or beliefs is crucial to their nature and validity. But he has not managed to dissipate the charge of a genetic fallacy. All he shows is this: *if* a particular practice or mode of thinking *defines* or *justifies itself* in terms of having a particular origin, then its actual origin becomes relevant to that justification. The reason is *not* that there is after all no distinction between the genesis of a concept or belief on the one hand, its content or validity on the other. Participants in the Catholic practice of

ordination *actually* defend it by reference to the idea of apostolic succession, and hence to a particular origin. In other cases the genesis of a practice provides a reason for or against it even if it is *not* actually adduced, e.g. when a legal norm has not been adopted through proper procedures. Yet neither the investigation of the actual reasons nor that of the best possible reasons is *per se* genetic; it merely takes on a genetic aspect in specific cases.

What is more, it is the *status quo alone* which determines whether a given concept is genetic or whether the actual or optimal justification of a belief or practice mentions its origins. Even if Williams is right in maintaining that liberal morality originally laid claim to superior breeding, this entails *neither* that its current proponents justify it in this manner *nor* that this is the best possible justification that can be given. If neither of these options holds – as I believe – then genealogy will be immaterial to the philosophical debate about the merits of liberal morality. And whether they hold depends exclusively on the present.

As Williams realizes, moreover, a functional explanation is not *per se* genetic. It is one thing to know the function of an organ, another to know its evolutionary emergence. Similarly, one can reflect on the function of our concept of knowledge,⁴⁸ without speculating about its origins. What counts is the *current role* which the concept has.

Williams' response is that functional accounts of our discursive practices 'are simply false'; 'their value always and necessarily goes beyond their function' because their participants are rational agents who have their own reasons for engaging in them (Williams 2002: pp. 34–5). But this observation reinforces rather than undermines the idea of a genetic fallacy. It suggests that a philosophical understanding of a practice must look *beyond* functional or causal explanations in general, notably to the way in which agents would or could explain and justify these practices. It does not entail that the functional explanation must be temporalized by looking at the genesis of either the concepts, *or* the practices that give them point, *or* the rational creatures that sustain them. Philosophical reflection need not furnish either a histori-

48. Hanfling, O. 1985, 'A Situational Account of Knowledge', *The Monist* 68, pp. 40–56; Craig, E. 1990, *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon).

cal or a fictional account of the emergence of our discursive practices, it must only *leave room* for such accounts.

Consequently, there is no a priori reason for regarding knowledge of the historical development of our framework as *essential* to philosophical reflection. On the other hand, given that our framework has evolved such knowledge is *helpful* in several respects.

For one thing, some previously dominant features of the framework may have receded into the background, and yet play an important role in our current philosophical puzzles. In principle it should be possible to retrieve these features from the current employment and function of these concepts; but it is easier to bring them into view by looking at earlier stages. For instance, Anscombe and MacIntyre have suggested that our deontological moral concepts originally derived from the idea of a divine command. *If* that is right, it will help to explain why these concepts seem to lay claim to an authority which is puzzling from a secular perspective.

Contrary to Williams, this potential benefit applies equally to scientific concepts. Even if science proceeds in an ahistorical manner, the *philosophical* problems it gives rise to are linked to concepts that are subject to historical change. Like other concepts, scientific concepts can acquire layers of diverse and potentially conflicting connotations. Thus Hertz, in a passage that profoundly influenced Wittgenstein's account of philosophy, demonstrated how terms like 'force' and 'electricity' became lumbered with different and incompatible conceptual relations during the course of nineteenth century physics, and how this gave rise to philosophical puzzles.⁴⁹ Furthermore, some scientific concepts display precisely the features that Williams identifies in practical concepts: a common core (often provided by an abiding function) which is modified according to changing requirements. Hertz's 'force' is an obvious case, and so is 'law of nature'.

For another, we are well-advised to try to profit from the philosophical reflections of the past, as argued above. To do so, however, we must pay heed to conceptual differences and conceptual shifts concerning the key terms. It is mistaken and misleading to simply identify Democritus' notion of an atom with that of Dalton or Bohr. It is mistaken and misleading to

49. Hertz, H. 1910, *Die Prinzipien der Mechanik* (Leipzig: Barth), p. 9.

equate Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia with our notion of happiness, or the notion of akrasia with our notion of weakness of will (MacIntyre 1984: pp. 35–8). Even within the immediate past conceptual shifts can lead to confusion, e.g. in the development of the notions of a tautology or a truth-condition.⁵⁰ If we study past philosophers we must do so in recognition of the historical differences.

As we have had ample opportunity to see, Wittgenstein himself did not engage in such a study. But his conception of philosophy and language point towards a minimalist historicism, namely one according to which knowledge of conceptual history is helpful though not essential.

50. Baker, G.P. and Hacker, P.M.S., 1984, *Language, Sense and Nonsense* (Blackwell, Oxford), ch. 4.