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Editor's Introduction: “What Does History Matter to . . .?”

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Contributors to this special issue of *The Journal of the Philosophy of History* were invited to write on the topic of “What Does History Matter to . . .,” in each case filling in the ellipsis with a specified philosophical topic. Not many in philosophy, I suspect, would acquiesce to the guiding assumption that history does typically impact philosophical inquiry in fundamental respects. Undaunted, the contributors herein advocate for how history influences various areas of philosophy. On behalf of all the editors of the journal, I thank them heartily for their efforts.

Several reasons motivated the initiation of this project. For one, the editorial ambitions for this journal include a focus on more than just traditional issues in the philosophy of history. Those “additional” interests would include investigations with regard to the more general sense in which histories of the very issues that philosophy analyzes shape the philosophical accounts that result. Such an approach implicitly assumes that the topics constituting philosophical inquiry do not themselves possess an ahistorical stability. This assumption harkens back to disputes surveyed some 35 years ago by Richard Burian in “More than a Marriage of Convenience: On the Inextricability of History and Philosophy of Science.”¹

¹ Richard M. Burian, “More than a Marriage of Convenience: On the Inextricability of History and Philosophy of Science,” *Philosophy of Science* (1977), 44:1–42. For a recent helpful overview of the debate behind this specific topic, see Mary Domski and Michael Dickson, “Introduction: Discourse on a New Method, or a Manifesto for a Synthetic Approach to History and Philosophy of Science,” in *Discourse on a New Method: Reinvigorating the Marriage of History and Philosophy of Science*, ed. M. Domski and Michael Dickson (Chicago: Open Court, 2010), 1–20. Domski and Dickson express a more optimistic view

Burian then articulated a “metamethodological” thesis that I at least would take to stand unrefuted and would as well generalize beyond philosophy of science.

There has, however, still been little explicit consideration of the precise ways in which – and the degree to which – historical studies ought to influence philosophers of science. This problem is the central concern of the present article. In it I argue for three theses, two methodological and one metamethodological: first, that in order to correctly determine the degree of support for theoretical claims one must often employ as input information regarding the temporal order in which hypotheses were propounded, theories developed, and experiments performed; second, that one must also employ additional, specifically historical inputs regarding the background knowledge against which these developments took place; and third, that historical studies ought to play an essential role in the evaluation and revision of current philosophical views about the logic of support. (Burian, 2)

Put another way, what Burian says of the philosophy of science I take to be the case for a wide array of philosophical topics.

Interested readers will readily identify for themselves the themes and merits of individual essays. Rather than offer some summary of individual contributions, this brief introduction will focus instead on some commonalities that emerged among these independently authored essays. These serendipitous inter-connections prove less surprising than one might first expect inasmuch as topics have a type of elective affinity.

For example, Hans Aarsleff, Geza Kallay, and Stephen Turner all write on different aspects of the philosophy of language. So that their essays bear some relationship to one another comes as no shock. More surprisingly, however, each picks on aspects of the still prevalent tension between idealist (rule driven) and social (externalist) explanations and analyses of meaning. Aarsleff, in his fascinating and charming essay on historical linguistics, provides a quote from a now largely forgotten 18th century scholar, an heir to the thought of Pufendorf, who puts the issues as follows:

than I hold regarding most philosophers’ commitment to the relationship between history and philosophy.

“There is no reason without conversation, conversation has no application outside society; and reason will not survive outside society. Or shall we then be mistaken if we say that the potential which is within men before the exercise of reason is nothing other than a tendency to reason with other men? Of course, every potential is aiming at realization, as towards a goal. Thus, while we say man is rational, that is the same as saying that he is social. *Socialitas* indeed is a general tendency, invested in the whole human race by God, through which he wishes life with other men to be blessed and peaceful.” That sums up [writes Aarsleff] the core of the nearly forgotten message of Pufendorf.

How the social works in as an inextricable element in the analysis of language structure and meaning then receives further detailed scrutiny in the companion essays. Kallay provides scholarly examination of successive attempts within the framework of analytic philosophy to deal with time in a way constrained by the assumptions regarding the logical structure of language. His insightful and detailed elucidation of the pitfalls encountered in this attempt leads him to conclude, for reasons in the spirit of Pufendorf, that “Taking the Wittgensteinian-Cavellian clues into consideration, I conclude that the interpretation of time and history in the philosophy of language is still to be written.” Finally, Stephen Turner, focusing as he does on what history matters to the analysis of linguistic meaning, fingers as his chief culprit assumptions underwriting an “atemporal” account of meaning – just the problem made manifest by Aarsleff and Kallay!

As if writing with the essays of Kallay and Turner before him, Noël Carroll’s contribution explores efforts in this century to develop an atemporal definition of art. Citing some of the same philosophical inspirations noted in the case of philosophy of language, Carroll argues that “Throughout much of the twentieth century, Anglo-American philosophers of art have wrestled with the question of how to discriminate art from nonart. During that period, the leading tendency was to approach that problem in terms of ahistorical, essentialist definitions of art. That changed as a result of Neo-Wittgensteinism and its aftermath, which resulted in Danto’s historically sensitive conception of the Artworld.” Carroll only passingly alludes in his essay to his own favored theory of how to historically constitute the Artworld. But that theme – the human hand in constituting an historical past by a narrative strategy – comes out forcefully in Maksymilian Del Mar’s piece on why history matters to the philosophy of

law. To provide just a tantalizing suggestion of the bold thesis for which Del Mar argues, note his claim to have shown that “If we think of law’s past – and perhaps the past generally – as a partner with whom we debate and discuss, we might come to balance two explanatory challenges: first, the challenge to see the contingent ways in which stabilising practices influence our need to sometimes take our partner to be saying something specific (and, by analogy, to treat the past to be in some specific way); and second, the challenge to see that no such stabilising practices can squeeze out our ability to see something new – something that surprises us and moves us in ways we could not have foreseen (again, by analogy, to find new resources in the past, these being resources that then allow us to re-imagine and transform our present and future selves).” The points as stated constitute fundamental reasons for the inevitable conjoining of historical and philosophical inquiry.

As Stephen Gaukroger’s intriguing and insightful essay on the relevance of history to the philosophy of history also makes vivid, the past is a philosopher’s partner in an ongoing dialogue, a partner capable both of stabilizing and challenging understanding. When situated in a dialogue with their history as they knew it, what becomes visible turns out to be just what for their time was new and surprising. “We have looked at four philosophers – Bacon, Gassendi, Locke, and Hume – for whom historical understanding plays an indispensable role in their philosophical thinking. Though Bacon and Gassendi are indebted to humanist modes of historical thinking... associated with the Renaissance, in their philosophical views they... break sharply with Renaissance modes of thought. Locke and Hume, by contrast, are canonical Enlightenment figures, and history shapes their philosophical enterprises in a new way. If the historical dimension of early-modern thought has been ignored, it is certainly not because it is negligible.” But what surprises here emerges when the lesson propounded by Gaukroger turns up in considerations urged by those addressing much more contemporary topics.

In particular, the provocative essays by Eric Schliesser and Jonathan Tsou suggest that the very notions of competency in the disciplines on which they focus – economics and psychiatry respectively – stand at risk if one ignores how history works into their predictive and diagnostic matrices. Specifically, Schliesser maintains that although by training and culture economic education excludes its disciplinary history, it weakens itself as a

consequence. “The guiding assumption of this paper is that the history of economics can aid economics to become a wiser and even more scientific policy science.” Relatedly, Tsou demonstrates that “Unless one assumes a naïve and ahistorical view of psychiatric classification, the DSM’s atheoretical and descriptive approach cannot be seriously regarded as an adequate end-point for psychiatric classification. . . . Given the complex nature of psychiatric classification – which involves a mixture of epistemic and pragmatic considerations – a promising approach for addressing philosophical questions regarding classification is to examine the actual historical factors that led psychiatrists to adopt their current ideals of classification. The chief merit of this approach is that it can account for psychiatrists’ own reasoning regarding issues of classification, while simultaneously considering the actual constraints that psychiatrists faced in addressing questions of how mental disorders should be classified.” In each case, a more open approach to how historical factors impact disciplinary formations would aid each in being a more effective science. Failure to be in dialogue even with its recent history blinds thinkers in each field discussed to important aspects of the problems investigated.

The essays by John Beatty and Isabel Carrera, Thomas Ryckman, and Jutta Schickore all address what history matters to philosophical issues in the natural sciences – biology, physics, and the history of experiments. Yet despite the otherwise open-ended invitation to write on their respective specialties, the authors again serendipitously all take up themes that touch on the core issue of experimental replication with respect to the natural sciences that concern them. As Schickore nicely puts matters in her concluding remarks, “I hope that my brief discussion of the concept of replication has shown that, and how, the investigation of past scientific episodes, the study of the evolution of scientists’ methodological thought, and the reflection on the recent past of philosophy of science matter. . . . Interpreting past methodological conceptions, tracing their emergence and development, and reflecting on the place of these concepts in today’s philosophical discussions will contribute significantly to our understanding of them.” It comes as no surprise to claim that evolutionary thought has deep connections to historical understanding. Rather, the novel insight developed in Beatty and Carrera’s elegantly styled account of replication and experiment in one key aspect of evolutionary biology is that, in their words, “But it is not the unpredictability of the future that makes the past matter.

Rather, it is the unpredictability of the past itself. When a particular future depends on a particular past that was not bound to happen, but did, history matters.” The resonant notion of the “unpredictability of the past itself” receives substantive explication in their account. Ryckman’s broad-ranging essay on why history matters to the philosophy of physics touches on much more than issues related to experimental replication. Indeed, he concludes by alluding to Burian’s canonical formulation of the issues. “The inspiring vision of a ‘marriage’ between history and philosophy of science, broached in the 1960s at what now appears to have been in a unique period of university expansion, has largely dissipated. The celebrated marriage was never consummated. Yet the necessity of connecting the two remains as obvious today as ever.”

Finally, the politically concerned essays of Colin Koopman and Steve Fuller remind readers that winners write the histories not just of nation states but also of disciplines. Regarding the former, Koopman develops a novel amalgam of pragmatism and critical theory by way of arguing for the bearing of the past on possible political futures. Koopman argues for the view that Foucault and Dewey represent a natural pairing in efforts to theorize the social world and speculate on how successfully to change it. As he states in his brief for the sort of “social hope” that he takes them to provide, “Both Foucault and Dewey argue that history matters because it helps us specify the conditions of the problems we face in the present, and helps us so specify in such a way that we might then go on to improve the problematic situations in which we find ourselves.” Fuller takes a rather more radical view of how history matters to science studies, proposing the intriguing thesis that imagines what it would be like to bring “unassimilated” scientists from the past into dialogue with how their theories have now been appropriated. Fuller imagines, more perhaps in the spirit of Feyrabend than of Popper, that such figures might protest against what they would perceive as distortions of misappropriations of their views, and how their protests might change or destabilize what we now take to be settled issues about science.

What is of issue regarding the role of historical consideration in philosophical reflections concerns how history matters to any account to be given of the, e.g., epistemological or metaphysical issues under consideration. To the extent that some philosophers write as if the subjects that they address have a timeless quality – Truth is One, then any historicizing

approach will doubtless seem wrong-headed. It remains unclear to what extent those who disagree on this point could settle the matter between them by evidence or argument. For the prior intuitions at stake in this dispute seem to come inoculated against the very sort of arguments that their opponents find most persuasive. In this respect, the essays contained in this special issue will be unlikely to change anyone's prior metaphilosophical position on the matters at hand.

But a more modest ambition remains to be realized. The essays herein alert those not already wedded to an atemporal approach to philosophical issues of the prospects for investigation on offer when one asks, "What does history matter to [fill in here one's favorite philosophical topic]?" If only to provide evidence of the vibrancy and fruitfulness of the union in question to those whose minds have not already been made up, the editors commend these essays, and the general approach they represent, to you.