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The history of philosophy as reconstruction

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Abstract

I start from several observations on how the Historiography of Philosophy has been seen since the 1980s when Richard Rorty provoked several important philosophers to take position. I note that one significant related problem is that of the addressability of philosophy for it is directly consistent with the History of Philosophy as a discourse. I discuss the problem of the audience of philosophy as part of the historiographical investigation in philosophy, considering the audience as intrinsic to the philosopher’s project. Then I rely on theoretical backgrounds such as Passmore and Gracia to introduce the specific of narrating philosophy as performative and interpretative act, therefore the History of Philosophy as reconstruction. My conclusion based on such is that the History of Philosophy is an actualization of as many possible counter-parts philosophical texts have in audiences’ minds.

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1. The problem of audience of philosophy

One of the most frequented philosophical subjects of the last century was no doubt philosophy itself; problems like “the end of philosophy” or new subjects like Historiography of philosophy have been explored so extensively that philosophy teaching may not, eventually, ignore such accounts. It looks like Heidegger’s belief that metaphysics and positivism are both speaking “the language of Plato” has been broken in several Platonisms in order for philosophers to revolt against each other’s practice of philosophy, like Rorty saw it [1]. So it seems to me that the historiographical problem of philosophy rests nowadays no more on finding a method of writing philosophical histories of philosophy, either problematic or cultural or doxographic, but on how philosophers find it acceptable to narrate about their field after all, often to each other but, not less, in front of their larger

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audiences. Are readers in the position to choose from philosophers’ accounts on the historical character of philosophy? Or is it rather that philosophy as practice and larger audience have long ago divorced? It is obvious that philosophy in its traditional meaning of argumentative and systematic discourse does not sell. It is also anachronistic to hope for a scientific history of philosophy that would involve unity of method, especially if that method is to rely on modern concepts like ‘system’ or categories. Every history of philosophy is in its own right a form of “mythos;” species of romance (the quest for truth), tragedy (as in Heidegger), comedy (like in Hegel’s philosophical history that ends with a universal reconciliation), and satire like in Derrida [2]. The ‘end of philosophy,’ if there is one, seems to mean, rather than other things, the end of its addressability.

Yet, there are serious concerns about the addressability of philosophy as such even among philosophers, when philosophical arguments do not satisfy philosophical communities. It happened during the 1980’s when a group of American so called Continentalists got to claim publicly that they felt marginalized as a minority within the American Philosophical Association [3] and consequently, organized a counter association called Society of Philosophers in America. The case is important as one can notice a philosophical group react as a cultural minority and claim extra-philosophical solutions to their problem by establishing a new association. If we accept that the Analysts can be seen as a national tradition in the USA, then we have here a concept of national philosophy at work as well. In this case, philosophical debates could not provide a solution and therefore appealed to political and judicial legitimacy. It is the case that either philosophy could not solve its own internal debates or rather that philosophical debates generated an extra-philosophical situation. Anyway, a relation between philosophy and a larger group of public is being highlighted and makes claim of its importance upon philosophical discourse. We are in the position to conclude that this is more or less a political rather than philosophical mission and it has many connections to what R. Rorty and L. Krüger accounted as puzzle solving philosophy [4].

The audience of philosophy is important to the philosophical narrative about itself. How we are to use Aristotle’s arguments in a contemporary debate on ethics, for instance, highly depends on the public’s representation on Aristotle. If we let Aristotle “remind one rather of an enormous stuffed dinosaur, not exactly extinct” but “hardly alive philosophically anymore” [5], then we will very often appeal to organizational and judicial solutions to philosophical problems, once philosophy itself as historical narrative loses credibility. But is it possible to have someone like Aristotle speak to an audience as if he were a contemporary – like any living or recently dead philosopher? Veatch was optimistic enough: contemporary debates got to intensively value ethics of virtue after decades of deontology and utilitarianism, as in the case of Marcelo de Araujo’s discourse on freedom [6]. But is this the outcome of Rorty’s theory on the philosopher as a “problem solving” hero – pragmatic, technical, proposing History of Philosophy as a rational reconstruction or synthesis for supporting scientific results [7]? Apparently, philosophy as a problem solving discipline (as seen in analytic tradition) would have been excessive, pathological [8], in the sense that it would have ignored history of philosophy, or reduced the whole philosophical practice to particular problems and motivations of weak relevance.

When dealing with the question of why one should read philosophy, since it became so hermetic, Gracia [9] reacts towards Rortyan’s problem-solving mission assigned to Philosophy by defining positive justifications of Rhetorical and Pragmatic nature – besides theoretical ones – to be used by philosophers: we should at least read history of philosophy as a source of professionalization in any field, as concepts grow from operational principles of the educated mind that seeks to gain social respectability and respect. It is pragmatic to study philosophy as a resource for methods and argumentative abilities, as it is equally essential to assume that solutions and arguments formulated by philosophers are not obtainable by any alternative means; therefore philosophy has its own monopoly. The pragmatic and rhetorical justifications may very well serve as arguments for the contextual relation between the author and the audience of the text.
2. Author and audience

A community comprising both the author and the audience has been anticipated since antiquity, when texts were usually addressed to familiar audiences sometimes in personal terms – many such texts having been known as epistles. The distinction between esoteric and exoteric writings in both Plato and Aristotle’s schools functioned more or less as a means of dividing the audience in two parts: first, there were the students who accessed the oral teachings and therefore considered to be able have an expertise over the master’s texts, and second, the larger audience whom these masters were usually afraid might affecting the teaching in an undesired manner.

Gracia [10] mentions another interesting example of Averroes, who advised his intended audience to be careful with what they say because only those bright enough, educated enough, and with sufficient leisure to think philosophical issues through can be trusted with philosophical information: those who, either because of their deficient nature, insufficient training, or due to their lack of time, cannot understand what philosophers say, are liable for causing suffering to philosophers. From Plato to Averroes, there is such prudence regarding the good intentions of the audience.

This can be traced back to the Ancient division between philosophy and sophistry or literature and oratory during the times when the Eleats were opposing Protagoras, when Plato was opposing Isocrates and the Sophists, and then when Seneca took distance from Rhetoric, Marcus Aurelius from his master Fronto, and when Augustine left Symmachus etc (on this, see for instance [11] and [12]). Philosophers from a different school of thought could not be addressed with esoteric texts because of the harm they supposedly produced; therefore, a community of mutual understanding and acceptation that makes a meaningful frame for understanding a text was acknowledged. If such a community did not exist, mistrust would appear between author and audience, as in the case of the Sophists who revolutionized the Greek education by practicing professional training based on money and contracts, like it is said that Protagoras would have his pupil Euathlos sued; contact with texts entered a new age – for instance we can see Plato introducing Socrates in the *Cratylus* to ironically say that he was not fully aware cause he could only afford the one drachma introductory lecture.

3. History and doxography

Another historical model of philosophical narrative is doxography. The most important source we have about Ancient and Hellenistic philosophy depends on Diogenes Laertius, Pseudo-Plutarch, Pseudo-Galenus, and Stobaeus, all known as doxographers. Michael Frede [13] explains that, firstly, a doxography is not a piece of contextual interpretation, but an exact reconstruction and narration of previous opinions or philosophical positions, with the aim of focusing on the interest they could have among contemporary debates [13].

On such a basis, doxography is only interested in narrating opinions that remained attractive and can be presented as if they were new. For this purpose, the doxographer is in the position of re-writing the ancient text or opinion. What Michael Frede [13] says is that

“the doxographer, for accomplishing his task, is obliged to translate the opinions into the technical language of the contemporary philosophy and adapt them to the conceptual structures of actual thinking; up to a certain point he needs to mask the opinions and positions of the past in order to give them the best clarification possible. For this end, the doxographer will even correct some minimal errors to the extent that he does not affect the essence of that opinion…”

Frede [13] considers such a practice not admissible for a historian because it alters the historical truth. Doxography is not considered history, as it tells a verisimilar and not historical truth; but a contemporary philosopher will be interested in doxography as a source of ancient opinions that fits into the actual debate. The paradox is that in order to serve a philosophical interest, doxography ‘legitimately’ deforms historical truth; for
instance, philosophical positions are narrated rather as coherent stories than dynamic demonstrations or tensioned debates.

Rorty did not attribute to doxography philosophical merits. It is only canonical, he said, and has resulted in “desperate attempts to make Leibniz and Hegel, Mill and Nietzsche, Descartes and Carnap, talk about some common topics whether the historian or his readers have any interest in those topics or not” [7]. Still, Rorty does not seem to believe that doxography contributes in any way to building acceptable narratives of philosophy; on the other hand, I do believe that Frede’s account of doxography is quite compatible with Rorty’s prescription of the History of Philosophy as a problem solving discipline.

But the relation between doxography and philosophy seems to be natural or, should we say, they are more or less parts of one and the same thing. Philosophy, both systematic and historical, depends profoundly on the doxographer’s reconstructions. How is the History of Philosophy to assume more context-sensitivity instead of verosimility in order to author historical truths? Is the historian of philosophy in the position to tell an objective story about a supposed historical object called philosophical text or opinion, independent of contemporary perceptions and knowledge? Within the classical tradition this is definitely not possible. Aristotle’s account on the History of Philosophy is “unhistorical” [14], but nonetheless doxographical in the sense that it relies on the presupposition that a history of truth seeking exists, and therefore the doctrines one can narrate are nothing more than successive steps towards the truth [15].

4. The peculiarity of narrating philosophy

Aristotle is known as the first philosopher who explicitly established a relation between empirical accounts and philosophical endeavors. Still, he did not seem to agree that History is, for any reason, philosophical or even scientific [16]. Thucydides’ histories were already public in the time of Aristotle, but the Stagirite did not mention these treatises anyway. He mentions Herodotus in the Poetics (1451 b, 1-9) only as an example of what poetry or any philosophical endeavor should never look like. History is strange to philosophy because it has a particular object (therefore contingent and accidental) whereas philosophy deals with the universal (verisimilar and necessary). Kurt von Fritz [17] listed several meanings of practicing history in Aristotle, as historia, Bios Ellados, biography and so on, but still, they are never considered philosophical by the Stagirite.

Pierre Aubenque [15] imposed a different view. The History of philosophy in Aristotle means an account of thinking, of logos, and that means that each philosopher participates to the becoming of truth in history or to the history of Being, in two senses, positive and negative. In the positive sense time and history are similar to the becoming (genesis) of Being, whereas the negative meaning is the progressive forgetting, mystification and natural erosion. The philosopher must contribute to what should be the aim of re-actualization. We cannot claim that Aristotle debates on Pre-Socratics’ ideas and positions for the sake of historical objectivity, in the sense of trying to narrate arguments. On the contrary, what he does is adding his own arguments and counter-arguments for the doctrines to be cleared of errors and conceptual confusions. It is like the previous philosophers are candidates to passing Aristotle’s critical examination.

This practice is similar to what Frede describes as doxography. In the beginning there was a rather an-historical narrative on philosophy, should we call it doxography. If we were to look after a History of Philosophy in the Aristotelian sense, it would be similar to the History of Animals or the books on Constitutions, a collection of raw data, rather absurd, as a matter of fact, because Philosophy is incompatible with the contingent; for Aristotle, there is no science about the individual. To have a scientific investigation firstly one has to build a universal or verisimilar object of investigation, which means that the History of Philosophy as objective account of opinions, textual facts, and so on, is not philosophical and should receive interest similar to the histories of Thucydides or Herodotus, more exactly, none. If this is so, the biographies or any other account on particular textual facts is not to be considered philosophy.
Narrative on philosophy cannot rely on any request for objective accounts as there is no particular object of it. History of philosophy is about forms of expressing the universal and that means that the historian, in this sense, will make the effort to contribute to a better and intelligible expression for a particular audience. So it is not the audience acting the universal here but the narrative itself and it will take particular forms depending each time on the particular narrator and the particular audience there is.

5. Author and the community of interpretation

A community of philosophers is not necessarily one of authors. The author of any given historical text offers an input to a greater group of participants to the act of philosophizing. The historian of philosophy acts as a narrator or intermediary author (or audience), each time for a different audience. According to Taylor [18], philosophy is only possible as re-interpretation or re-writing of

“what we are doing, thinking, believing, assuming, in such a way that we bring our reasons to light more perspicuously, or else make the alternatives more apparent, or in some way or other are better enabled to take a justified stand to our action, thought, belief, assumption. Philosophy involves a great deal of articulation of what is initially inarticulated…”

Once a historical text gets occult in meaning, understanding it is still possible through reinterpretation and rewriting. Philosophizing is an act of reading texts, interpreting, understanding, writing about texts in such a way that general and non-specialized publics become philosophizing publics, often by intention of the author of the text. Such an account suggests that the philosophizing public and professional philosophers are in a sense equal co-authors; in Lore’s terms [19], they are executant authors (artifex) – the makers who allow an idea to be transmitted by means of expression.

In his ontology of audience, Gracia [10] even suggests that the author of the text and an active audience become non-distinct. Audience is

“any group of persons, real or imaginary, either familiarized or potentially familiarized or destined to become familiar with a given text” [10].

In their relation, audience and author are two subjectivities that interfere in creating a common text that is historically dynamic, and generates, in turn, communities of interpretation based on the agreement that their interpretation should be added to the original text. Such a community of text produces a re-phrasing that can be considered part of the text itself [10] so that the philosophical text (even historical) and the philosophical practice are not separable, but one and the same: we do philosophy as we rephrase or rewrite; texts never lose meaning, they are continually written in time. Contributing to the writing of philosophical texts is part of what we may call philosophizing. If Kant or Aristotle seem unable to answer our contemporary problems it is because we ceased to rewrite their texts or have lost trust in our capacity of reconstructing and making them contexts for our problems. In the absence of the accidents that caused occultation of historical texts, our access to their meaning would not have been better; still, once some text gets occult, interpretation and rewriting is still possible, as the only method proper to philosophy. We are philosophizing along with the historical philosophers themselves, regardless of their age, during the very act of reading their texts.

Finally, there is no such thing as an audience of philosophy, in the passive sense of the term, therefore all audiences are, or become, at some point, narrators. Gracia [10] describes five types of audience. Author as audience means that an author is the first consumer of his or her own text, as writing is a continuous dialectic from being author to being reader; many authors like Wittgenstein adopt the position of adding meaning to the text, while writing it. Intended audience is a person or group of persons intended by the author to have access to the text, whether it is real or imaginary, contemporary or non-contemporary. Contemporaneous audience includes all the persons that are contemporary to the author of the text and supposedly have access to the cultural context. The intermediary audience is not contemporary to the author or to us, but is important “in the process of
transmission and understanding of texts from past ages far removed from the time when an interpreter is seeking to understand those texts” [10]. The intermediary audience influences the way we understand texts, acting as co-author as it produces interpretations and annotations. A contemporary audience is the most remote from the historical author and text, in other words the most recent. According to such stratification, a body of text that is added by an intermediary audience to the original text (as interpretation or tool for interpretation) becomes a legitimate part of the text itself as long as there is a community of interpretation that agrees upon such body. The idea of a community of interpretation may be understood as merely another concept for what Passmore called cultural history of philosophy [20], as long as it seems to deny the importance of historical sequence and pay consistent attention to the understanding of the ‘horizontal’ cultural context. In fact, the very difference from the cultural history is that the community of interpretation is not strictly horizontal but diachronic or vertical as well: the audience, no matter how far in time, as intrinsic to the philosopher’s projected work will enrich the text to the extent that it is an active audience. To the same extent, the author’s original text is by its nature a user-oriented entity.

6. Active audience. Subversive and repressive

Any historical text is condemned to exist as a collective entity because either contemporaneous or contemporary audience can access it and therefore propose it as a collective meaning and social object. Agreement or consensus of individual readers on the ideas signified by a text comes after debates of different forms (like written texts, seminars, letters, Internet forums and Social networking platforms). As others had suggested, a text is a “series of acts of production, a never-ending assemblage or polytext” (Mc Gann, Jerome, 1983: 52. Apud [10]).

The audience re-creates a given text while actively understanding it on multiple levels such as perception (of the physical entity), understanding (of the signs composing the text), recognizing (of the structure within the text), creating (or filling in the missing information, often on the basis of extra textual references), or judging [10]. This is exactly an act of composing. But such interference with the text may be regarded as an act of subversive and repressive character; nevertheless, for instance, the ironical interpretation of a philosophical text, or the political interpretation of a religious text are not mistaken interpretations. They cannot be considered abusive towards the text since there is a community of readers that may say ‘yes’ to the new meaning. The repressive character of the audience consists of the “imposition of limitations on texts and thus the exercise of power and dominion over them” [10]. The author, in any sense (historical or pseudo-historical), can be repressive to the audience, an audience can be repressive to another audience, and the audience (imaginary or projected) can even be repressive to the historical author itself.

A philosophical school or tradition is understandable as an open concept that on the other hand de-constructs the idea of incommunicability of paradigms. As Alexander Baumgarten [21] says, a philosophical paradigm is to be assumed as: (a) relative, namely that the propositions are not paradigmatic per se but only in relation to the interpreter or commentator who assumes such character of the text; (b) accidental – that is, may the premises be criticizable, the theory stays relevant; (c) self-contradictory: a paradigm is permissive with all the contradictory sentences formulated by the interpreters and historians, being open to a plurality of coherent stories about it. If this is acceptable, then what we call reading History of Philosophy means necessarily rather a concession between the text and the interpreter than assuming the text has a stronghold of original ideas that we are supposed to unveil.

The ideas may be there in some way, but the artifact itself, the philosophical text, is not able to allow any reader to access the philosopher’s intentions and genuine thoughts. We establish a relation to the text and interpret it as paradigmatic, criticize the ideas and premises to the extent that we would expect the text to contradict itself. It is only then that a philosophical text will make sense and especially give readers the feeling of acquiring an understanding it.
For readers, no less than for the author, philosophizing is a performance and not a passive state of mind. Consuming philosophical texts is different from consuming media or literary texts; when philosophy has the form of literature, like in classical texts that philosophers once used to recognize as philosophy [22] – for instance dialogue, prayer, debate, poetry or novel – it is still different from literature to the extent that it cannot be reduced to its narrative, given that it may have one. Plato’s early and middle dialogues, when reduced to the dramatic setting, do tell stories of Socrates’ life, but it is exactly at this point when we decide to go into philosophy, stretch something and re-create the text by filling in missing data taken either from other Platonic dialogues or from different texts assumed as parts of an accepted more or less coherent tradition.

7. History of Philosophy as performance

We take a text to be philosophical only when we can perform an act of re-writing it, an act of reconstruction. The history of philosophy is a reconstruction in this sense. In order to be a History it needs to refer to a text, an author and philosophical ideas supposed to be transmitted by that text. But it also needs to be based on a more or less accepted idea on history itself; otherwise it is self contradictory as a Historical discipline. If that idea of history is Historical, namely, according to the methodology from within the History as scientific endeavor, then the History of Philosophy is part of the Historians research and turns into something like the History of Ideas. On the other hand, if the subsequent idea of History is philosophical, then the History of Philosophy is possible only on the basis of a Philosophy of History as such. If this is so, it is also true that the methodology for the former will be given by the last. So it is possible to define the History of Philosophy as a problem-solving discipline, as Rorty said, only if we accept that History means, for instance, a progressive accumulation of arguments and ideas that can be eventually used to solve contemporary problems. But that will be exactly what Rorty does not want, namely a form of Historism. In conclusion, the History of Philosophy is either a Philosophical discourse or it is impossible. But a philosophical discourse entails and relies upon a position on history as well. Therefore the History of Philosophy is always a philosophical performance, namely a philosophical reconstruction of sources.

The doxographers and philosophers from antiquity had similar engagements, as Frede mentiones [13]. They endeavored to present all philosophical positions of the past as if they were contemporary, precisely because they had a certain conception on history that made this attitude possible. In this sense, philosophical text and philosophical practice are equivalent. The re-phrasing and interpreting of a text produces a legitimate component of the text itself: ideal and intentional texts can become actual if an interpreter instantiates text-related ideas (in glossing for instance); therefore philosophical texts have counter-parts [10] in authors and audiences’ minds which become actual by reconstruction. But is this reconstruction affected by the historian of philosophy holding certain beliefs to be true or false? Historians, Skinner says, and philosophers even less we may add, can never hope to perform an act of bracketing their holds, and it would be unwise [23]. The historian of philosophy as rational agent in Skinner’s terms [23] is legitimate to have concerns, methodological questionings, and consistency building attempts. We should be able to assume that we have in common with both our ancestors and our following enquirers common beliefs about consistency and coherence.

The text as individual entity is historical as such but then it is only accidentally an object of the History of Philosophy: extant texts can be narrated but when a physical text is destroyed, philosophical narratives are still alive. It is because, to narrate Skinner’s claim, individual statements are embodiments of particular intentions on particular occasions addressed to particular problems [23]. Classic texts do not deal with our problems, therefore problems of philosophy are not transcendent to persons and ages. In other words, a given text can be object for the History of Philosophy only when instantiated [10], otherwise it cannot be historical. But the History of Philosophy narrates on texts as instantiated universals. Most probably, the more counter-parts a philosophical text has, the more important it is; the more counter-parts become actual by an audience reconstruction, the richer that text is and the longer significant tradition it has.
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