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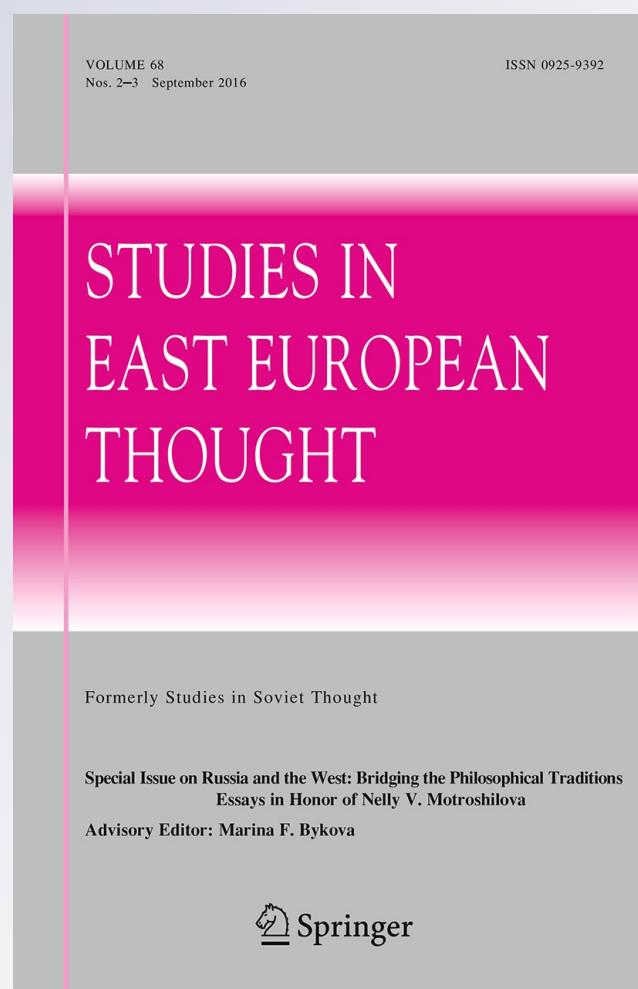
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Philosophy: history and theory

Abdusalam A. Guseynov¹

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Abstract The article discusses the role and place of the history of philosophy within the philosophical discipline. It shows that the history of philosophy is the main source and the medium of theoretical quests in all the areas of philosophical knowledge, and as such cannot be the exclusive domain for professional historians of philosophy. Being a specialized area of knowledge with its unique subject, it is an intellectual laboratory for all philosophical specialties, a place where, by the study of the philosophy of the past, we discover new ideas and find the solutions to the pressing problems of the day. Thus, this branch of philosophical investigation cannot be merely perceived as philosophical history proper, but should be rather viewed as a contemporary way of philosophizing.

Keywords Philosophy · The history of philosophy · The theory of philosophy · Historical-philosophical scholarship · Academic (scholastic) history of philosophy · Auteur genre in philosophy

The relationship of history and theory within philosophy reveals some features that make it unique, one of its kind. Two of these features are particularly tricky and enigmatic.

First, philosophical systems are positioned with regard to one another as if each were the first and only system. Speaking about the prevalent trend, one system is not a continuation of others, and rather than elaborating them, arises alongside them, formulating in a new way the same old questions but answering them in a new way. Every philosopher begins *ab ovo*. Diverse philosophical systems do not form a single chronological ascending chain in which every link co-opts the previous links.

✉ Abdusalam A. Guseynov
guseynovck@mail.ru

¹ Institute of Philosophy, Russian Academy of Sciences, 12/1 Goncharnaya Str.,
Moscow 109240, Russian Federation

They are positioned in space as if they existed simultaneously. Each philosophical system of course has its mortal author, arises during a certain epoch in a concrete situation, and bears characteristic marks of the period. Yet its content, at least potentially, has an everlasting relevance. Arising in time, it has an extra-temporal character. The deeper a philosophy is immersed in the affairs and passions of its time and its era, the more accurately it expresses their spirit, the greater its chances are of surviving them and getting a new lease of life at other times and in different eras.

Secondly, in spite of the inherent pluralism of systems, philosophy exists as a complex and contradictory, but inwardly integral system of knowledge. Autonomous philosophical systems retroactively form a picture in which even irreconcilable systems turn out to be necessary and equally valuable parts of the whole.

The connection between the history and theory of philosophy can be seen either as total coincidence or total disjunction. Because philosophy is inherently pluralistic and represented by a diversity of systems and teachings of commensurate significance which, once they appear, remain relevant for philosophy thereafter, that entire body of systems built up in the course of history constitutes its theoretical content. In that sense the history of philosophy is simultaneously its theory. On the other hand, as has been noted, philosophical systems are autonomous, each seeming to start from scratch as if it were the first to discover the philosophical truth. In developing his system the philosopher is not constrained by what philosophers have said before him, he can do without it, can choose to invoke some names and ignore others, skip over epochs, etc. Therefore a philosophical theory in each of its singular examples is independent of the history of philosophy.

Needless to say, when we point out that the history and theory of philosophy are either identical or totally different we are referring to extreme cases that are rare. In reality, the relationship between them oscillates between these two poles. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that extremes themselves are not accidental, stemming as they do from the very nature of philosophy, which is a form of cognition and at the same time a way of life. The fact that philosophy represents a certain cognitive attitude to the world and is linked, in this capacity, to other sciences, sets strict parameters and criteria of philosophical knowledge that lends it an objective and universally relevant significance. Diverse philosophical systems that emerged in history can be interpreted as stages and different approaches to the cognition of the philosophical truth that make up a huge and evolving theory. Thus the history of philosophy coincides with its theory and is summed up in it. Philosophy is also a way of life: it considers cognition from a spiritually enhancing perspective, carrying its ideas about the world to the stage of formulating normative ethical programs of human behavior; philosophers as a rule have sought to abide by the morally binding principles of their teachings. As a way of life, philosophy is a realm of individual decisions subordinate not to the general laws of cognition, but to the absolute laws of freedom. Philosophical theory itself is the spiritual practice of the individual and society, the practice that presents their choices, their decisions, and responsible acts. Interpreted in this way, it turns out to be autonomous of all previous philosophical experiences.

The complex and ambivalent character of the relationship between the history of philosophy and the theory of philosophy has many consequences. One of these is the

special place of the history of philosophy within the structure of philosophical knowledge. Let us consider this question within the experience of the development of philosophy in the Soviet Union and present-day Russia.

Philosophy develops differently in different countries, the main factor being its institutionalization and place in the system of education and science. One of the features of Russian philosophy is that, beginning at least in the second half of the last century, it has been cultivated in research and educational practice in all its historical diversity. Differentiation of philosophical knowledge has reached a very high degree: thus, for example, dissertations are defended in nine philosophical specialties and philosophical departments have chairs that span all the main aspects of philosophy (the oldest philosophical department, that of Lomonosov Moscow State University, has more than ten), the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Philosophy comprises more than a score of research units working in a great variety of focus areas. Within the framework of philosophical knowledge the history of philosophy is a special research and educational discipline; it is not only on a par with logic, epistemology, the philosophy of science, ethics and other branches of philosophy, but is separate from all of them taken together. Both teaching and academic research are organized in such a way as if the history of philosophy is something different from philosophical theory and in some ways commensurate with it.

The philosophical landscape in today's Russia took shape in the years when the only philosophy allowed officially was Marxist philosophy, similarly to the European Middle Ages when there was no alternative to Christian philosophy. The Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism shares the arrogance characteristic of all philosophical doctrines in considering itself to be the sole and ultimate truth. It views the entire philosophy of the past as an immature approximation to dialectical materialism and as having theoretical significance only as a preparatory stage for Marxism. Meanwhile following the emergence of Marx's and Engel's dialectical materialism, any philosophy that challenged the latter was automatically suspect as distortion of the truth and therefore subject to exposure and criticism. This disposition with regard to other philosophical schools implied a clear-cut separation of the "mature" theoretical content from "imperfect" philosophical exercises of the past and "erroneous" philosophical ideas of the present. In practice such an attitude resulted in theoretical and research divisions aiming to separate Marxist philosophy from the chairs and areas dealing with pre-Marxist and non-Marxist philosophy. Thus the separation of the history of philosophy from the theory of philosophy was institutionalized. The idea was to single out and highlight the philosophy of dialectical materialism as patently superior to all other philosophies and as well as to provide a background for the critical study of the entire historical philosophical process, in this way bringing its advantages into higher relief. Dialectical materialism was to be presented as the apogee and center of world philosophy as a whole. However, the inner logic of philosophy, the spiritual and cognitive wealth it had accumulated over two and a half millennia, and the everlasting existential meaning of the theoretical disputes and moral quests that unfolded within its framework, changed and in many ways refuted that initial plan.

In the actual practice of teaching and studying philosophy the history of philosophy has emerged as the key and most highly sought discipline. As early as

the 1950s at Lomonosov Moscow State University's philosophical department we studied the history of philosophy during the entire five-year course, literally from the first lecture devoted to the Miletus school to the last lecture devoted to Existentialism: almost as many hours were allotted to that subject as to all the other theoretical courses combined. The department that ran this course was noted for the superior professional standard of professors and was the most popular department among the students. The creation of special departments and research units contributed to the systematic study of the history of philosophy with all its various trends, schools, and historical stages. Needless to say, these studies were conducted from a highly critical angle informed by Marxist theory through the prism of the struggle between materialism and idealism, dialectics and metaphysics, which simplified and often distorted the real picture. The assumption was that the truth is already known, which assumption, although it blocked understanding, did make it possible and even obligatory to examine the entire historical spectrum of philosophical thought.

During the Soviet period, there was a constant tension between the narrowness of the Marxist analysis of past philosophy and the wealth of its real content, which did not fit into the framework of such analysis. Suffice it to say that "errors" in the interpretation of the history of philosophy led to victimization on ideological grounds. In the late 1920s a project to create a multi-volume *Encyclopedia of World Philosophy* based on Marxism was conceived and launched by the Institute of Philosophy that had been established for that specific purpose. However, the project was suspended as part of the struggle against "Menshevizing idealism" in a bid to make philosophers subservient to the political goals of the state. An insightful multi-volume textbook on the history of philosophy started taking form at the turn of the 1930s–1940s, but work was suspended under a special resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) that condemned the already published third volume for its "objectivist" approach to classical German philosophy. In 1947 *A History of Western Philosophy* authored by Alexandrov (1946) was criticized for departing from the principle of the struggle of parties within philosophy. The above-mentioned conflict between the content of the history of philosophy and the prescribed method of its study came to expression even in the case of the five-volume *Philosophical Encyclopedia* published in the post-Stalin era in the 1960s–early 1970s. True, on that occasion no administrative sanctions were imposed, although there were attempts to do so.

This is not to say that studies of the history of philosophy were free of dogmatism, incompetence, and deliberate ideological distortions. Far from it. A good example would be the one-sided and truncated version of the history of Russian philosophy that prevailed at the time. In general, my purpose here is not to evaluate the historical philosophical research of the time, but to point out that the isolation of the history of philosophy as a separate academic discipline and a distinct area of research had some positive consequences. One can safely name the following: (a) striving to cover the entire history of philosophy, (b) actualizing the problems and ideas that run through the history of philosophy, and (c) including knowledge of the history of philosophy as a mandatory criterion of professional competence. Such a separation and in a certain sense juxtaposition of the history of

philosophy and its theory had of course some negative consequences as well. It encouraged a schematic approach to the history of philosophy and deprived theoretical works of content.

As the monopoly of Marxist philosophy waned until it finally disappeared from the scene in the late 1980s, philosophy changed its tone in its approach to the history of philosophy moving from a largely critical assessment to analysis and interpretation. The philosophy of the past came to be regarded as an area of theoretical inquiry and debates that are still relevant. In 2000 Academician Teodor I. Oizerman, the leading authority on the history of philosophy, published a book entitled *Philosophy as the History of Philosophy* (Oizerman 2000), and 12 years later another prominent specialist, Vasilii V. Sokolov, borrowed that title for his extended work on the history of philosophy (Sokolov 2012). Both authors understand the history of philosophy as its theory extended in time and existing in different versions. Other notable works were likewise devoted to the history and theory of philosophy. The conferences organized in recent years by the Institute of Philosophy at the Russian Academy of Sciences devoted to Kant, Hegel, Hume, and Rousseau have demonstrated that the work of these outstanding past thinkers is a joint philosophical and cultural heritage attracting strong interest among specialists in all fields of philosophy and not only those pigeonholed as historians of philosophy. In the teaching of philosophy there are signs of history and theory being joined, as witnessed by the philosophy textbooks that draw to a significant, if not overwhelming degree on historical-philosophical material. In short, there is a clear trend of the history and theory of philosophy drawing closer together, but how far might this trend go? To answer that question one should take a closer look at the history of philosophy as a discipline and its forms (or genres).

There are at least three different types of approach to the study of the philosophy of the past, which for want of better descriptions can be called, first, research or scholarship, second, academic or scholastic, and, third, the auteur genre. Let us consider their main characteristic features.

Research in the history of philosophy has mainly to do with texts, their reconstruction, clarification, translation, commentary, and analysis in close connection with the given period and its language. In this case, the text is the ultimate reality, “a thing in itself” as it were, and the main requirement is objectivity, an unbiased approach to what is under consideration. Scholarship in the history of philosophy can be considered textological as its main subject is a text taken as a whole or in regard to some specific fragments. The French philosopher Pierre Hadot, a specialist in ancient philosophy, translator and commentator of Neoplatonic and Stoic texts, stressed that he studied works, not complete doctrines,¹ since the latter called for different (less precise) methods. Furthermore, such studies are typically specific and scholarly, their novelty and results depending on rigorously verifiable facts. They blend philosophical analysis with historical and philological analysis, and indeed the latter, especially philological analysis,

¹ In one of his works, Hadot writes: “I am inclined more to study philosophical works than philosophy because I doubt that it is possible to accurately reconstruct the bodies of philosophical teachings or systems” (Ado 2005, 220).

predominates. There is no doubt, for example, that the translation of philosophical texts requires both philological and philosophical acumen, though in what proportions is still a matter of debate.

Originally, the research trend in philosophy took shape chiefly in connection with the study of the antique heritage. It has a long tradition and has produced some outstanding names and schools. In Russia, a model work of this kind is Solomon Ya. Lurie's definitive study *Democritus* (Lurie 1970). The resurgence of this first and undoubtedly most fundamental type of historical philosophical studies has been a highlight of philosophical life in Russia over the past two or three decades.

The aim of the historical-philosophical research is to examine past philosophical doctrines, and such studies vary in regard to coverage and style, which can be academic or popular. The outcome of this kind of research is literature that is intended mainly for educational purposes as well as for anyone wishing to broaden his/her cultural horizons. These studies seek to provide a summary that offers a general idea of specific teachings, of particular thinkers, schools, historical epochs, or even of past philosophy as a whole. They take the form of essays, textbooks, monographs, reference books, and encyclopedias. Although they seek to be objective, the author's view is always more or less discernible, as a result of which one and the same body of doctrines can be systematized now one way, now in another.

Academic history of philosophy (used mainly for educational purposes) is the most wide-spread and common genre of historical-philosophical literature. It traces its origin at least back to the famous book by Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (Diogenes 2013), which is still one of the key sources on ancient philosophy. The role of academic history of philosophy tends to increase over time as the volume of philosophical knowledge increases, since without the mediation of the history of philosophy it becomes difficult to understand this growth. An outstanding model of this type of study is Eduard Zeller's multi-volume *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* (Zeller 1883). Russia has a strong tradition of academic history of philosophy. Examples include Vladimir Solovyov's essays written for the *Brokhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary* (Brokhaus and Efron 1890–1907), and the university course in ancient philosophy by Trubetzkoy (1997). Of later works, staying with antiquity, one can mention *Ancient Philosophy* by Asmus (1968) and *A Course in Ancient Philosophy* by Chanyshv (1981).

The historical and philosophical essays of great philosophers come close to the academic history of philosophy. They are basically introductions to their own systems and represent not so much reviews as analyses and often criticisms. What has been said above about the tendency of Marxist philosophy to take a critical view of the rest of philosophy from its own vantage point is not something unique. Such an approach is typical, though in the case of Soviet Marxism it acquired an exaggerated form. The tradition of critically reviewing earlier philosophies before presenting one's own by way of a contrast goes back to Aristotle. This brings us to the third type of historical-philosophical studies that we call the auteur history of philosophy.

The distinctive feature of the auteur history of philosophy is that it provides a new reading of past philosophical teachings; these teachings are theoretically

analyzed and reinterpreted in the context and from the viewpoint of those who write about them. This is not so much a study of past philosophy as a dialogue with it. The philosophical teachings and texts even of the remotest times are examined as if they were written today and as if the people who wrote them were our contemporaries. Auteur history of philosophy is avowedly subjective: it makes no attempt to grasp the logic and language of the text under consideration and understand it as a text written by another person at a different time. On the contrary, the author who analyzes the text modernizes it, translates it into his own idiom, and includes it in his own logic of thought. In a manner of speaking, he looks for himself in the texts and teachings of the past, considering them as material that enables him to express himself, his own thoughts.

Auteur history of philosophy is of more recent vintage. Of course it has its roots in the ancient understanding of philosophy as a highly personal business, as intellectual solitude. In retrospect, one finds a justification of the need for the author's view of philosophical texts in, for example, Plato's Letter VII where he argues that it is impossible to express a philosophy in the inflexible form of written characters (cf. Platon 1972, 544),² and therefore only a person who has made philosophy his own can understand philosophical discourse. Even so, the individual auteur (not historical or philological, but philosophical) view of the philosophy of the past flourished in the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century. Hanna Arendt, for example, associates it with Heidegger "who, precisely because he knew that the thread of tradition was broken, was discovering the past anew. It was technically decisive that, for instance, Plato was not talked *about* and his theory of Ideas expounded; rather for an entire semester a single dialogue was pursued and subjected to question step by step, until the time-honored doctrine had disappeared to make room for a set of problems of immediate and urgent relevance. Today this sounds quite familiar, because nowadays so many proceed in this way; but no one did so before Heidegger" (Arendt 1971). Heidegger's writings about ancient philosophy are indeed an outstanding example of auteur history of philosophy. But can they be considered to be works on ancient philosophy? Hardly anyone would study Anaximander and Parmenides based on Heidegger's writings, but one may well gain insights into Heidegger and his philosophical thoughts on the basis of what he said about Anaximander and Parmenides. In Russian, an example of this type of auteur philosophy is "Lectures on Ancient Philosophy" by Mamardashvili (2009). The lectures open with a rambling introduction in which the author (lecturer) explains that he proposes to discuss ancient philosophy ignoring the fact that it was created two and a half thousand years ago not by him, but by others: "We shall try to approach this material in such a way as to become aware of the living things that stand behind the text and which actually prompted it [...] Texts are only worth reading and discussing when you do not fill yourself with dogmatic learning, but restore the living aspect of thought that made them endure" (Ibid, 9). And

² In this letter Plato writes about the special nature of philosophical thinking that only some people are capable of in order to explain why he had only one extended and frank conversation with Dionysius when he tried to present to him his philosophy only to realize that Dionysius was not equipped to understand it.

further on: "In a certain sense Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Socrates are our contemporaries" (Ibid, 11).

Such, then, are the three types of studies in the history of philosophy. Perhaps they do not exhaust the entire variety of such investigations and they certainly do not rule out other kinds, but their presence cannot be gainsaid. The descriptions of these three types are surely not exhaustive, but suffice to tell them apart and to see that the differences are substantial. They are so substantial as to require different specializations within philosophy. Among the many questions that arise in connection with specialization one in particular merits attention. Scholarly and academic philosophies may be grouped together as a distinct area of philosophical knowledge. They warrant such a grouping, although they probably do not constitute the group as a whole. But can what we call *auteur* philosophy be seen as part of the history of philosophy? To answer that question one should go back to the peculiar relationship between the history and theory of philosophy discussed above.

We talk about the history of philosophy. But does philosophy have a history in the first place? Or, to put it another way, is not all of it history? We speak of past philosophy, the philosophy of the past, which is justified because philosophy fits into the framework of historical chronicles. But what can be the meaning of the past of philosophy? In my opinion, one of the features of philosophy is that it cannot be consigned to the past and become outdated. It is the hallmark of genuine philosophy that it remains relevant and continues to be a source of new inspirations. One may even make this paradoxical claim: philosophy has no history if by history one understands the past that is beyond our power. As asserted above, philosophical knowledge differs from other types of knowledge in that it exists as a collection of independent systems (theories, schools, movements, etc.). There is no one philosophy. There is a multitude of philosophies: that of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, Xenon, Augustine, Descartes, Hume, Marx, Kierkegaard, and so on; tens and hundreds of philosophies, and new philosophies keep being created. The twentieth century produced a dozen, if not more. These philosophies have been elaborated with varying degrees of completeness (not everyone managed to create systems to answer all the questions, to give a definitive answer, locking the universe with a key in the manner of Plotinus or Hegel), but all of them without exception (and this is one of the defining features of philosophy) professed to deliver the solely true and essentially final philosophical understanding of the world. In that sense every philosophy is equal only to itself. Some people may like one philosophy and one tradition and other people may like others. But no one has managed to rank them in accordance with the criterion of truth. The fundamental although off-putting and downright mind-boggling thing that non-philosophers fail to grasp is that all philosophical systems, the host of philosophies created over the centuries, are of equal value when measured by the criterion of truth. We are often, for various reasons, ignorant of much of the philosophical literature published today. Yet, we all have on our shelves "Extracts from Early Geek Philosophers," the works of Aristotle, Kant, and a few others; these thinkers of the past have a stronger claim to be our contemporaries than even our colleagues in the next room.

Pluralism and the enduring character of philosophy account for another paradox of philosophical knowledge. Philosophical truth can only exist as something

complete. Every philosophy professes to offer the truth and therefore cannot but regard contemporary or previous philosophies (especially the ones closest to them) negatively, often drastically so. Each philosophy explicitly or implicitly proceeds from the assumption that other philosophies are false. This is not falsehood on account of some judgments or teachings, which can actually be recognized and commended (as, for example, the Stoics did with regard to their ideological adversary, Epicurus), but on account of their philosophical essence. Needless to say, this is not due to the personal vanity of philosophers, many of whom were very modest people, but due to the nature of philosophy. Take, for example, the question of the Primary substance (Element), which no philosophy can sidestep. Thales said everything came from water. Heraclitus derived everything from fire. Hegel began with nothing. Religious philosophers derive everything from God. Representatives of dialectical materialism considered the world to be infinite, etc. Clearly, each of these philosophers had to regard the claims of the others as false. Legend has it that Plato bought up the works of Democritus and had them destroyed. Legend it may be, but for some reason it has caught on and is readily reproduced in the history of philosophy. However, it is a fact, not legend that Spinoza had a low opinion of Plato and regarded Democritus as an authority. In the history of philosophy, as in the history of other spheres of knowledge, especially the humanities, one can observe all types of links except one. What is signally absent is an ascending line of continuity. As distinct from specialized sciences, in philosophy the following generations do not stand on the shoulders of the previous ones, but rather on their bones. At least that conclusion is suggested by the subjective logic inherent in various philosophical systems.

This is not to say that every philosophical system arises on a clean slate, not knowing what previous philosophers have done. Quite the contrary. To justify its *raison d'être*, every philosophy must demonstrate that it offers a more adequate understanding and solution of problems with which previous philosophical system wrestled. This accounts for the amazing endurance of the themes and problems that philosophers tackle. Philosophical questions are rightly referred to as eternal questions. However, they are eternal not only in the sense that they are always the same and that therefore new philosophical teachings should trace their sources to antiquity, which they typically do. They are also eternal because they need constant renewal. The questions as to what space, time, truth, matter, the good, consciousness, beauty, happiness are—and the list goes on and on because it is open-ended—have no solution that is true once and for all. They create a field of constant intellectual tension calling for ever new interpretations as new scientific data come to hand and social requirements change. This is the business of philosophy which seeks a new understanding and solutions to the eternal problems that correspond to the times, for which purpose it must know the old interpretations and solutions.

In some ways the history of philosophy can be likened to a medieval church which has been built and enlarged for centuries, as in the case of Notre Dame in Paris, for example, with all its domes, stained glass windows, altars, side altars, chapels, statues, and murals etc. that encompass and speak in their language of holy and human history, human aspirations, virtues, vices, hopes and fears, and all that constitutes man's spirituality. It is no accident that philosophy seen in retrospect, as

the history of philosophy, acquires an inner coherence as if it were written by one person. It is indeed written by one person. They are all different people, but each time one person recreates, analyzes, embraces from one viewpoint, and builds a single panorama of the philosophies of the past. If I were to name one name as a model it would have to be Hegel. He was the first to see philosophy as evolution, as the creation of a multi-volume work. He portrayed history as ascending a mountain whose pinnacle is his own system. He described it in such a way as if all the philosophers of the past succeeding each other, arguing with one another, were doggedly and purposefully working so that he, Hegel, could create his *Science of Logic*. As a philosopher he developed the method of the unity of the historical and the logical and applied it to philosophy. No succeeding philosopher managed to repeat Hegel's exploit. That is impossible, not only because Hegel was exceptional, but because the images of the history of philosophy are exceptional. They are auteur images, like philosophical teachings. The history of philosophy is the philosopher's mirror. Looking in that mirror we see our own face.

To sum up, the history of philosophy cannot be the exclusive domain of professional historians of philosophy. What I described (aptly or not) as auteur history of philosophy should perhaps be considered to be a special form of philosophical theorizing rather than philosophical history proper. The history of philosophy is the main source and the space of theoretical quests in all the areas of philosophical knowledge. It follows that the history of philosophy, while being and remaining a (specialized) area of knowledge having great achievements to its credit great vistas ahead of it, is at the same time an intellectual laboratory for all philosophical specialties that imply and demand a different, strictly theoretical approach within which it is perceived not as history, but as modern philosophizing. To turn to the philosophy of the past does not mean to shy away from the pressing problems of the day. What matters is how to turn to them and how to speak to them.

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