

Introduction to the Study of the History of Epistemology

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ANDREJ DÉMUTH

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PETER LANG
EDITION

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Writing about the history of epistemology is somewhat strange and, in a certain way, an unappreciated enterprise. It is difficult in much the same way as writing about the history of thinking and particularly of philosophy itself. There are several aspects to it.

The first aspect is *the methodology of the history of philosophy* and particularly the history of epistemology.

1/ It seems that one of the most natural approaches to depicting the history of philosophical (epistemological) thinking, is to present a chronological account of the philosophical opinions about the problem of knowledge in the way that these opinions were recorded in the texts of the individual thinkers. Similar to any other histories, this task could be approached by providing a virtual chronological account of the thinking, and highlighting the most important milestones in the development and

formation of individual schools of thought according to their historical relevance. However, problems would arise right from the beginning of such an approach.

1.1/ The first serious problem of the history of philosophy is the fact that *it is not clear when and where philosophy as a discipline evolved*, or when it actually began. If we look in textbooks, we discover that the authors of various histories have often stated different dates and places (Greek islands vs. ancient China, India, Mesopotamia, or even the territory of ancient Egypt), especially when stating different influences and reasons for the origin of a philosophy and its individual disciplines. Some thinkers discuss the history of philosophy solely in the scope of the etymology of its name and consider it to be a Greek or European endeavour. Other authors are willing to consider its Asian roots (Indian Vedas and Upanishads, Chinese philosophy, etc.). Authors argue not only about the reasons for the origin of philosophy (wonder, hardship, an abundance of free time, social communication, etc.) but also about its first representatives. Determining the place and origins of philosophy are accepted only with limited consensus. The question of the origin of gnoseology or epistemology, the theory of knowledge, noetics, and other similar fields of thinking (terminological, historical, and geographical aspects in: Démuth 2009, 11 – 14) are related to this very question. The process of the emancipation and independence of philosophy from other disciplines happened alongside

the emancipation of separate philosophical disciplines and the formation of a theory of knowledge. For this reason, dating the establishment of separate philosophical disciplines is accompanied by the same polemics, and often by simple consensus. Despite the fact that the time of the establishment of epistemological and gnoseological examinations cannot be determined precisely, it is obvious that the issues of the existence and nature of knowledge constituted a serious problem in the period in classical Greek philosophy explained by both the sophists and Socrates (the anthropological turn towards man was also a turn towards knowledge and its sources) and most of the other philosophers of this period.

1.2/The second serious problem of the history of epistemology is the *incompleteness of the historic sources* of knowledge. It seems that there is no complete record of all the philosophical and epistemological opinions and theories that occurred during the history of human thinking. On the contrary, the sources that are available to us are rather narrow in range and they only provide access to individual opinions. This is especially true for the first stages of thinking (evidence of these in the form of written or material culture) which are almost never found to be complete or perfectly preserved. Rather the opposite; they are often introduced to us in fragments/torsos, fractions, or mediated references. Many historic concepts were also not preserved, either because their authors (similar to Buddha, Socrates, or Christ) never

wrote anything themselves, or if they did, their works were not immortalised, and we learn about their opinions only from secondary sources. All of this means that it is impossible to provide a full account of the history of epistemology, and what we encounter mostly are only the main ideas behind the concepts (or what we find to be the framework/most important), and some of the important concepts may be missing completely. This is not just the case with the oldest writings.

Similar to the old writings, even with historically younger writings it can happen that important, eloquent or exceptional insights into the problem might not be saved, or are overlooked. Over time, it might be proven that an exceptional thinker lived in certain period and his/her ideas were extraordinary or that their ideas indirectly influenced the evolution of thinking in a given period. The discovery of such a thinker (or his/her writings) is comparable to the discovery of an unknown universe which might enrich or even change the meaning of everything we know. From time to time, the importance of certain thinkers is re-evaluated and they become determining personalities in history, while others lose their importance. This is the fate of several thinkers, and lately the case of Johannes Nikolaus Tetens who became equivalent to Hume and other prominent thinkers in German philosophy.

1.3/ The archaeology of any kind of knowledge is not a simple matter of observing the passing of time. It is

more a task of constructing and reconstructing existing theories and opinions. This knowledge, however, points directly at two issues. The first is the *moment in which history is constructed* by historians or witnesses of historic events. Contrary to the objects of material culture, history is largely a human product (G. Vico). It is the product of influential individuals, but also a product of its users. In a way, it could be said that history is constituted by its readers in much the same way as the meaning of a text is never given solely by its author; we can attribute meaning and authorship to the reader as well. The reader or interpreter of history is recreating the existence or non-existence of historical relations in an attempt to preserve real events and meanings according to what was preserved or what is represented in the notes and opinions of relevant historical authorities (Démuth, 2007:11). However, these point to a second problem: *Who determines the relevancy or irrelevancy of thinking procedures and opinions?*

1.4/ Diogenes Laërtius, one of the archetypes of a historically transmitted interpretation of knowledge, provides *an account of ideas and opinions of thinkers* that he considers relevant. In his work, both important and less important ideas and opinions can be found. Moreover, in his account he does not limit himself only to academic writing, but also lists anecdotes and unclearly transmitted opinions. Laërtius is therefore among those who have attempted some sort of independent histori-

ography which does not try to provide access to only certain aspects but, on the contrary, he strives for some sort of objectivity by giving the reader a chance to choose what is important. Thereby, however, the reader is overwhelmed and weighed down.

1.5/ Laërtius is often accused of not being systematic and scientific in his scrutiny. Because of an inability to distinguish relevant from irrelevant and the absence of a systematic account and orientation in the inner logic of history, most philosophers try to reject this kind of approach to history. The body of knowledge and information, which lacks inner order, which does not differentiate the important and does not have a classifiable inventory is not acceptable for the user. Contrary to a gathering place of information, the scientific approach prefers libraries, systems of data arranged according to reasonable principles, and the presence of classifiable structures. Thus, the history of philosophy becomes the *history of philosophical issues* over time. These histories analyse the individual opinions about a problem and present them in a chronological order (the approach of Nicolai von Hartmann for example). This kind of approach implies that philosophy has its own inner logic, a system. It implies that philosophy is not just an accumulation of opinions but rather an investigation of things and their aspects which allows abstracting from the unimportant. This is a possible approach to the study of philosophy in general, as is the case of the Anglo-

Saxon philosophical tradition. Here, to study philosophy means mostly familiarising oneself with a problem and its relevant solutions abstracted from the overall historical development of philosophy, individual schools and representatives, as well as the other philosophical opinions of given thinkers. It is a study of a problem and not of history. With this approach, however, one has to rely on a selection made by somebody else – made by somebody who analysed the historical aspects of the problem. This is what helps us to get to the core, and to abstract from the unimportant. However, the problem is not only who makes these decisions regarding what is important, but also the criteria they use to make them. How can one know what is unimportant if one does not at least glance at the rest?

Objections may be raised due to the fact that the key criterion for the evaluation of “relevance” is the nature of the subject under examination. If I am interested in knowledge, the examination of other aspects of philosophy seems useless. After all, the individual sciences and philosophical disciplines were formed in this way. Over time, these disciplines specified the subject of their examinations and the methods by which they would approach it. Understanding the history of philosophy as the history of philosophical problems is an example of the selection and specialisation of thinking (narrowing down the problem), however, it is not an elimination of its main difficulties. It is just a narrowing of the initial

problem via selection par excellence. Any selection is an interpretation, rather than an objective observation.

1.6/ No matter how much Laërtius tried, despite his effort to record everything (important and unimportant), *he did not avoid a subjective evaluation of relevance*. This was a result of the *selection of philosophers* that he thematised and the importance he ascribed to them, with regard to what he did and did not mention. Herein lays a serious problem of history of this kind.

1.7/ It seems that it is not possible to give an unbiased and completely objective account of events, but only subjective insight into a problem with attributing some degree of relevance to it. This happens merely due to the fact that I thematise or do not thematise something, and via the context in which it is done. In this respect, it is possible to say that the historical relevance of a thought does not lie in its accuracy or truthful depiction, but rather by its *influence on successors, by its ability to provoke or “infect”* other thinking.

1.8/ Some theoreticians of the history of philosophy therefore think about history as the *history of philosophical systems* (either rupturally or continuously changing). It was in this (dialectic) way that history was approached by G. W. F. Hegel. What an interpreter of history is really interested in is not a particular fact, or an expressed idea, but rather its influence on the formulation of other philosophical opinions. In this understanding it is possible to extract the inherent laws of history by discover-

ing the logic and causality of the formation of individual philosophical opinions (Sobotka). In this sense, individual concepts can be considered as pre-stages of their successors. Or as Hegel put it: a walk through the history of philosophy is not a walk in a cemetery of long dead thoughts, instead, individual concepts are still present (in a positive or negative way) in new concepts through dialectics of the history which uncovers them. It is possible to approach history by trying to uncover its chronological line of development – the continuity or discontinuity of individual opinions and their representatives.

However, it is becoming obvious that we should not pay our whole attention to the examination of logic and the rationality of particular thinking when scrutinising the formation of philosophical, scientific and other social opinions and most of all the process of their preservation and transmission. It is often the case that the degree of influence or real relevance of a thinker, school, or opinion is based in many irrational factors.

1.9/ Whether a philosopher becomes relevant does not necessarily depend on the trueness of his/her thoughts, but rather on the spirit of the era, on the application of his/her thoughts and on accumulating followers, or on the formation of a relevant framework of reference. This suggests understanding history as the process of the formation of cultural-historical contexts.

This approach to history of philosophy does not understand philosophy as a quest for truth, but rather

as an *expression of life* with all of its rational and irrational elements (K. Marx). A lot of philosophers gain recognition by chance, or rather mostly through the work of their followers. This is not only the case of Socrates, but most of all with Leibniz, whose philosophy became state philosophy only thanks to the work of Ch. Wolf, or the example of H. Arendt's promotion of Heidegger. In this sense, it is increasingly obvious that the existence of followers makes a philosopher a real personality independently from his/her thoughts (like the spreading of memes e.g. "Servít je vůl"). This is how Hegel's lectures on aesthetics were preserved they were written down by his students without him having to write them down himself. The greatness of a philosopher is thus often an expression of many aspects, including non-philosophical ones, and in this sense it is easily possible that truthful concepts may have disappeared while erroneous ones might have been preserved thanks to better propaganda or other powerful paradigmatic circumstances. Historians therefore also study why Aristarchus's opinions of the non-geocentric nature of the universe were not recognised, whereas almost two thousand years later Copernicus came up with the same idea. What led to Copernicus' ideas being accepted? Why were Philoponus's comments pointing to the incorrectness of Aristotle's theses refused? What caused Galilei to change modern science via a relatively marginal special-science thesis, while many others did not?

This approach to history is examined by the sociology of science or knowledge, as well as similarly oriented historians (T. S. Kuhn, I. Lakatos, P. Feyerabend, and M. Foucault). The basis of this approach is certain cultural hermeneutics which are based in the examination of the Hegelian objective spirit as a mirror of life and thinking in different eras revealing many contemporary and cultural-historical relations.

1.10/ The cultural hermeneutics of history consider understanding an era based in the era itself as important. The essence of this approach is the ability to understand an author the way in which he/she meant it or (probably better) even to uncover what the author did not even reflect him/herself. For this reason, it is important to analyse individual historical concepts through the prism of their historic roots. The key point of the history of epistemology, therefore, is not to trace certain concepts of the evolution of the history of our knowledge, but rather an examination of the historical artefacts that document this history. In the case of the history of philosophy, it is mostly an analysis of texts.

Ernst Daniel Scheiermacher, one of the founders of hermeneutics, claimed that if we want to understand an author or an era we have to first examine his/her statements in their historic and cultural context. None of us is the sole author of the language and era in which we live, and therefore it is necessary to understand philosophical thoughts and influential texts in the context of the

whole sum of the given language. Only by a comparison of statements with their language and ideological context is it possible to achieve a subjective or divinatory understanding of an author through discovering his/her personal beliefs and opinions which stay hidden in the text. If a historical thought is to be understood, it is necessary to try to understand it from the point of view of the author, to understand it in the way the author and his contemporaries understood it – those who initially accepted or refused the thought.

It often happens that while reading the text of a certain thinker we look at his/her words from the perspective of a different historical context. For example, when reading Aristotle, we often understand his thoughts (e.g. his *Physics*, or his concept of movement, universe, or explanation of free fall) through what we learned in classes of philosophy or physics, and therefore in the context of post-Aristotelian interpretations, respectively in the context of Newtonian physics. The problem is that if Aristotle's statements are perceived in such a post-Aristotelian perspective, they are misunderstood, because it is not possible to see what he saw when he discussed such matters. In the perspective of Newtonian physics, Aristotle's words seem unclear and sometimes incomprehensible, or even absurdly naive. This, however, is only due to the fact that they are perceived within Newtonian discourse. Instead of looking for natural place (Aristotle) we perceive gravitational

pull (Newton), instead of contact motion we perceive the effect of forces (contactless and over a distance). The same words might be used, but their different meanings are not grasped, and therefore it is not clear what their author meant. Using any kind of language is comparable to a different point of view which we might adopt. It gives us a chance to see things in a certain perspective, however, it makes seeing other thing impossible. This is why Francis Bacon warns of the danger of the idols of market – language (*idola fori*), but also from the idols of cave (*idola specus*) in his theory of idols, and thus highlights that every prior understanding influences the way that we understand the new things we encounter.

Following the insight of a phenomenological approach, if a text and the intention of its author is to be understood correctly, first, it is necessary to somehow forget everything we know about the text or its author, and even to forget everything we know in a given context and to try to read the text in a way so that it will reveal the story it embodies on its own. This form of phenomenological or interpretational reduction would hopefully enable us to see the text's original intentions, undisguised by layers of subsequent interpretations, and in Husserl's sense (back to things themselves) it brings us back to the original meanings.

Understanding a text is a process of uncovering its original meanings. It is an attempt to look at a problem through the eyes of the author. This is what could be

considered as the greatest art of the history of philosophy – letting individual authors speak and seeing the world through their eyes. This is how philosophy can be perceived as a system of still living insights, and not as a walk through the famous cemetery of dead and surpassed opinions.

2. The second serious problem of the history of philosophy (and therefore epistemology as well) is the fact that contrary to many other sciences, *philosophy does not have a complete subject of study* (Kant 1999, 48). To teach maths or physics means to teach a complete knowledge – its laws, algorithms, and certain contents of knowledge. This is not the case with philosophy. This is why Kant does not assume he teaches philosophy. This would mean that some sort of solid philosophy – in the sense of a sum of laws, opinions, and indubitable truths (similar to the content of Euclidean geometry) – actually exists. Kant does not think this is the case, at least not in the sense that other sciences exist. Philosophy means a love of wisdom and not wisdom itself. Moreover, whoever ever would like to teach it as a subject has to assume that he/she knows these truths (wisdom) or even possesses them. Most philosophers do not consider themselves to be the owners of truth or wisdom, rather the contrary. Despite the fact that they all try for wisdom, it is not because they would own it, but because they want to know it. According to some thinkers, philosophy does not have a fixed subject which could be given an account

of. Rather, it has a subject which can be approached, which is probably the biggest problem of philosophy and therefore of the history of epistemology as well.

If philosophy is a love of wisdom, then what we approach when teaching it is the art of philosophising. This, however, is not based in meaningless arguing or fighting about truth, but rather a sincere quest for it. The history of philosophy can be perceived as a history of searching for the truth, as the roads which individual philosophers have taken in the course of history in hope that they would find and get to know the truth, good, or beauty. This is why it is so difficult to “teach” philosophy. What can be taught is rather some sort of devotion, or initiation into a personal quest for truth or wisdom – a road which is always individual in its nature. In this respect, philosophy is a collection of possible prospects from which problems – whether these are the problems which preoccupied the old thinkers, or those that seem to be current to many of us – can be seen, and through which solutions can be sought. With a bit of luck, a question which preoccupied one of our predecessors may be seen. With even more luck we might find and adopt his/her solution. In this respect, the history of philosophy could be perceived as a kind of library of possible solutions. Thus, its study represents solving prepared personal puzzles.

More often, it is the case that the problems and questions that preoccupy any of us are just as individual in

their nature as we are. This means therefore, that our problems are not identical to those which Plato, Aristotle, or Kant were solving, at least not in every aspect. I believe that one of the greatest talents of mankind is our ability to correctly identify a problem, abstract the important, and be able to formulate a reasonable question. In principle, the correct formulation of a problem enables its solution. This is why the art of posing a question is the basis of philosophy. I think that questioning is characteristic of a philosopher (more than to provide answers). Not only because questions stimulate thinking and distinguish a philosopher from a “believer” (in the sense of non-problematizing), but also because every answer implicitly brings a possibility of new and often deeper and more complex questions and problems. The study of the history of philosophy can help us to formulate our own questions.

What makes philosophy really attractive is the fact that it does not offer a single correct solution to a specific problem, but rather a way of how to look for the correct solutions to specific problems. The different views of problems of different thinkers become apparent while studying history. This is when one can realise that things do not need to be perceived in a single commonly proposed perspective, but a problem can appear differently in different perspectives. The study of the history of philosophy is a study of the possible perceptions of a problem and the search for its solutions.

Therefore, it seems a little paradoxical to write any history of philosophy or history of epistemological thinking at all. It seems that it is not very relevant how the chronology or universality of philosophical thoughts were perceived by any of the philosophers studying the work of other philosophers (e.g. W. Röd, R. Scruton, F. Copelston, H. J. Störig, etc.). Rather, it is important how they were perceived by the original author and most of all how they continue to be perceived by different readers. The best way to study the history of epistemological thinking is by reading and interpreting the original texts. What I am interested in is not how a reader understands Scruton's understanding of Kant, but how he understands Kant himself.

I am aware that this motto represents a serious devaluation of the proposed work. If it is true that what is relevant for an interpretation of any history are the readers' understandings and perceptions of its development, important moments, and discovering connections, then why should anyone try to propose any history of epistemology at all? Should not the reader construct it him/herself? Is not every proposed history always a subjective perception of reality, its constitution and its proposals as something objectively given that should be adopted by the reader? Isn't the initial problematization of history just a game that the author does not take seriously given the fact that he/she proposes a certain history anyway?

The proposed work does not try to give a coherent, complete, or absolute acceptance aspiring perception of the history of epistemological thinking. On the contrary, it is rather meant to be a provocation, to tickle or stimulate thinking. Its author is aware that he cannot propose more than his own analogy or interpretation of selected philosophical opinions about knowledge. He is also aware of the fact that the selection of main thinkers cannot provide more than a certain typology of historical approaches to the interpretation of knowledge. Moreover, I am also aware of the fact that an attentive reader does not need to agree with the proposed interpretations, that he/she might see what the author of the commentaries is unaware of, and even that in some rare cases the author's interpretation does not necessarily express the original intention of the original author exactly. Therefore, to avoid these mistakes as much as possible, the chosen methodology is an interpretation of the well-known, and in my opinion, the most relevant parts of texts of individual authors with a constant reference to the original text in order to encourage the reader to check or provide a new interpretation and thus to surpass the author himself.

As the base, I have chosen a classic structure of texts in chronological and ideological order. In the beginning of this study, I will try to present four basic types of classical perceptions of the problem of knowledge through an analysis of the atomistic theory of percep-

tion, Platonism, Aristotle's doctrine of knowledge, and the ancient (and also non-ancient) approach to knowledge. Then, modern rationalism will be introduced along with sensualism and Kant's attempt to overcome both approaches with a turn towards the cognitive subject. The last chapters are dedicated to attempts to cope with Kant's conclusions in the form of phenomenological-existential, pragmatic, and (post)analytical perceptions of the problem of knowledge. The selection of the presented approaches does not aspire to be a complete presentation, neither in the number of discussed types, nor in providing full interpretations. The proposed work aspires to be an introduction – a basis for the reader's own interpretations and this is reflected in the structure of the text as well. The chapters are organised in a manner providing the reader with basic facts first (becoming familiar with the historic context, key terminology, and concepts) and introducing more complex problems later on. The text should encourage independent and creative thinking and solving the proposed problems. Besides references to original sources, each chapter concludes by recommending primary and secondary literature that problematizes the author's writings or which interprets or complements the presented mosaic of opinions and problems in a different way.

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