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# How to Think with the Head of Another

The Historical Dimension of Philosophical Problems

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## About the author

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## Abstract

*How to Think with the Head of Another: The Historical Dimension of Philosophical Problems*

R. G. Collingwood famously stated that, if something appears to be unreasonable, it is likely the answer to a question we have not yet understood. He therefore invited to think of philosophical theorems as answers to philosophical questions. In other words, every philosophy has its history. This also entails that, in order to understand a philosophical problem, one has to think with the head of the other philosopher. I will illustrate this with a number of examples, including Immanuel Kant, René Descartes, Michael Polanyi, and Friedrich Nietzsche with the paradigms of narrativity, internal and external aspects of thinking, and contextualization. I hope to show that the divide between history of philosophy and philosophy proper does not actually exist.

## **How to Think with the Head of Another: The Historical Dimension of Philosophical Problems**

### **1. If something seems absurd, it is the answer to a question that is not yet understood.**

Let me start off by telling you in advance where I got the notion that the pursuit of the history of philosophy amounts to thinking with the head of another. In his autobiography, R.G. Collingwood describes thinking as a relation between question and answer. Embarking from the example of a particularly ugly statue, he formulates the conjecture that this object only seems ugly because the viewer does not recognize the intention of the artist and cannot know whether this intention might have been expressed successfully. From this, he deduces that one cannot figure out by the mere study of spoken or written statements what anyone thinks, but rather one must also know the question behind what was said or written, that was intended to be answered.<sup>1</sup> In parentheses, Collingwood adds that the author of any such statement trusts that his audience shares his initial question with him.<sup>2</sup> He thus points to an assumption that is only implicit and that the author of any proposition simply cannot or cannot always make explicit. We need to come back to this later. Presently, it is rather important to see that Collingwood applies this type of argumentation to history and philosophy. For him philosophical problems are not perennial problems but rather such problems that evolve in the course of history so that "problems as well as their proposed solutions had their own history".<sup>3</sup> Just as technical means like ships in naval battles develop and thereby shape the actions of their commanders, so also the problems are always different every time in the course of the history of philosophy. Consequently, "we only know what the problem was by arguing back from the solution."<sup>4</sup> From this, he draws the radical conclusion (with which he not only ruffled the feathers of his Anglo-Saxon fellows but for which also their heirs today would declare him incompetent), namely, "For me, then, there were not

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<sup>1</sup>R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, Clarendon Paperbacks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 31. – I am grateful to Andrew Olesh, Jr., for translating this contribution from German into English.

<sup>2</sup>Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 31: "(a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours)".

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 70.

two separate sets of questions to be asked, one historical and one philosophical ... There was one set only, historical.”<sup>5</sup>

From this, we can conclude that to understand a philosophical thesis always means as much as to interpret it historically, insofar as it is to be read as the answer to a question posed by the author. Whoever thinks that Immanuel Kant's thesis, that it is the human mind that prescribes its laws to Nature (*Prolegomena* § 36), is nonsense, must read the main question of the essay along with his argumentation over again. And if the reader is still resenting the paradox, he should note that Kant anticipated that; and eventually the reader should ask himself on account of which way of posing the question he thinks the opposite is plausible. In doing so, he will hopefully discover that, while science may make use of plausibility, philosophy uncovers plausibility. To uncover plausibility in a philosophical statement is equivalent to finding and rephrasing the question to which the thesis is an answer.

## **2. If something seems absurd, there is a story behind it.**

In the 1980s, the German philosopher Hermann Lübbe lectured at many places on the topic "What does it mean: 'This can only be explained historically'"<sup>6</sup>? A truly German topic because explaining things historically is practically a national sport in Germany.<sup>7</sup> Lübbe's examples stem mostly from social and political life: odd road layouts, superfluous institutions - one can come up with any number of examples. The point is always that such apparent absurdities have a deeper meaning, one that can be laid out by a narrative. It is fundamental that there is not only an obvious reasonableness of facts, the one that would strike no one (for instance, that stamps are pasted on the front of the letter in the upper right corner), but also a latent one, which underpins the superficial. This hidden reasonableness can make sense of something that is on the surface nonsensical. And this subterranean reasonableness generally can only be disclosed or even brought about by telling a story. There is surely a story that explains

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>6</sup>Hermann Lübbe, "Was heißt: 'Das kann man nur historisch erklären?'," in *Geschichte - Ereignis und Erzählung*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck and Wolf-Dieter Stempel, Poetik und Hermeneutik 5 (München: Fink, 1973), 542 – 554; numerous reprints.

<sup>7</sup>In the satirist's pun: a German "weiß nix, kann aber alles erklären" (knows nothing but is available to explain anything), which entails telling a story: Jürgen Kessler, ed., *Hanns Dieter Hüsch, Kabarett auf eigene Faust: 50 Bühnenjahre* (München: Blessing, 1997), 133.

how and why stamps are pasted where they are pasted<sup>8</sup>, and there is likewise one that makes an unreasonable street layout reasonable. If we apply this to a philosophical example, Kant's laws of nature, then we may say: The theory of the dictation of the laws of nature seems counterintuitive, it's true, but there is a hidden meaning, which one can draw forth by telling the story that led Kant to this proposition, and this 'story' - that is, the thought process - makes the counterintuitive theorem reasonable. Stories, historical explanations, not only make *unreasonable* things reasonable; they even make reasonable things reasonable.

Now, one can argue that Kant's thesis is not really explained by telling a story, but rather by reconstructing a thought process; after all he himself is not taking the paradoxical theorem and trying to make it plausible after the fact, but the whole time he has been working toward his thesis by strict scientific deduction. On the other hand, in addition to all the rigor of the argumentation itself, Kant himself refers to the genesis of his idea in the history of ontology and science in the Enlightenment. In the preface to the *Prolegomena*, Kant declared his intention to convince historians of philosophy "that it is unavoidably necessary to suspend their work for the present, to consider all that has happened until now as if it had not happened."<sup>9</sup>This statement can be read as a program that, for the sake of philosophical thinking, history has to be made not-happened, however only for a methodological purpose, to the effect that the meaning of the philosophical thought becomes understandable through history, and not just memorized "for the use of apprentices," as poor teachers of philosophy would think.<sup>10</sup>Upon closer inspection, the conceptual argumentation and the historical situatedness merge seamlessly into one another. This is why Kant himself agrees to tell the story that led up to his theory. Let us look at other examples, the very kind wherein the author points to the narrative as support for his core thesis.

René Descartes is undoubtedly the philosopher who introduced the myth that the philosopher as such must free himself from the historical conditions of his thought, so that there are still philosophers who believe that philosophizing takes place only and in principle in a history-free void. With his methodological doubt he ruled out everything that might be an

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<sup>8</sup> Internet search engines provide such stories: "Can You Put a Postage Stamp Anywhere on a Letter? - Yahoo Answers." Accessed April 16, 2014. <https://uk.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20111026054501AAXbgiF>.

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science with Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Hatfield, Gary. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 5 (A 255).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

external source of thought in itself, so that the pure *cogito* could remain. From this then follow consequently the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*. Regarding Descartes' claim, two things are to be noted right away: first, that he embedded his thesis in an autobiographical, i.e. self-historicizing, narrative, and second, that it is famously not historically true. After all, it provoked hosts of historians to find his sources, especially in the philosophy of the Second Scholasticism, the Middle Ages and in Augustine. In the strict sense of the word, Descartes is lying; to his exoneration, though, one must point out that through the telling of his story, he is putting his readers on track. Had he argued purely conceptually that the *ego cogito* is the basis of personal being and therefore led to the adoption of the dual mode of being as an idea and as a physical thing, it would probably have been clearer but also more difficult to categorize historically. In that Descartes claims to have made his observations apart from the history of philosophy, he at the same time points to it. He who is poised on a tightrope above the abyss should not look down. But we historians have to read the forward-fixed gaze of the artist as an indication of the abyss. The Cartesian *cogito* is not a walk in the park. It is an attempt to cut out the historicity of thought in order to show forth the purity of thought. As readers of the historical Descartes though, we must ask: where is the problem across which he balances. His autobiographical tale of dreaming by the Swabian fireplace during the break in the middle of a military campaign invites us to include history in the pure thought of the *cogito*. When in the *Second Meditation* Descartes says that this "I am" is "a being who doubts, perceives, affirms, denies, wills, wills not, and something that also imagines figuratively and feels,"<sup>11</sup> he says exactly that: the *cogito* is mired in doubt, motivations, fantasies and feelings. The history of pure thought is part of thought; otherwise thought would be not pure but rather empty.

I have chosen the metaphor of the tightrope over the abyssin order to recall Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. Thus, man is not a mere idea, man is not even a man, he is only a transition: "Man is a rope tied between beast and Overman - a rope over an abyss."<sup>12</sup>For our purposes, we may gather that it would be absurd to regard a philosophical concept as if it had neither origin nor as-yet-unreached destination.

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<sup>11</sup> René Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, II 8, AT VII 28: "Sed quid igitur sum? Res cogitans. Quid est hoc? Nempe dubitans, intelligens, affirmans, negans, volens, nolens, imaginans quoque, et sentiens." (My translation.)

<sup>12</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, "Zarathustra's Vorrede", § 4, quoted from <http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/Za-I>. (My translation.)

I would like to mention briefly one more example, that of Nicholas of Cusa, who famously upon completion of his work on "learned ignorance" related that the thought came to him on the ship during the voyage from Byzantium to Venice. Before I call to mind the details of the voyage, I would like to immediately point out the paradox that a highly abstract thought is presented as the result of a journey, a journey that cries out to be told. That it is possible to comprehend God in an incomprehensible way, so the main thesis of the work, requires numerous detours and crossings of boundaries. This means: the peak of speculation is indeed free of space, time, limits, conditions and every other conceivable constraint, that is its nature in itself. But it will be reached on a path, on a journey. Thus, Cusanus asks us to retrace the genesis of the coincidence of opposites, so that exactly those opposites are discovered that are nullified. This genesis is structurally similar to a journey. So to think with the head of Cusanus also means "to draw the opposite just when you have found the point of union." So Giordano Bruno answered Nicholas of Cusa,<sup>13</sup> and Bruno knew something about traveling. The actual journey, of which Cusanus reminds his readers, was his task of accompanying the Byzantine delegation to Italy to the Council of Ferrara and Florence. It dealt with nothing less than the restoration of the union of the opposing Eastern and Western Christian Churches, the reconciliation of the opposites, the reinsertion of the *filioque* into the general profession of faith. So it is clear to which question Cusanus's "learned ignorance" was the answer. The nonsense of this ignorance has a concrete as well as an abstract, conceptual history.

### **3. Philosophy can mean: telling stories. And stories create a framework in which thinking takes place.**

Since Nietzsche has already been brought up, it no longer needs to be demonstrated at length that philosophy can take place within stories. To this point Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is a massive exemplar of philosophy in the form of a novel. But even in the narrowest sense, just like in the examples of the framing narratives of a thought in Cusanus and Descartes, it is doubtless that the story told points not only to the systematic and historical development of the thought, but also establishes the framework that makes the idea comprehensible.

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<sup>13</sup>Paul Richard Blum, "Sapertrairil contrario dopo avertrovatoil punto de l'unione': Bruno, Cusano e il platonismo," in *Lecture Bruniane I-II*, ed. Eugenio Canone (Pisa-Roma: IEPI, 2002), 33–47.

As an important witness, I would like to call again Immanuel Kant. In the foreword to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, notably only in the second edition, he describes his discovery as a revolution:

“Reason must approach nature with the view, indeed, of receiving information from it, not, however, in the character of a pupil, who listens to all that his master chooses to tell him, but in that of a judge, who compels the witnesses to reply to those questions which he himself thinks fit to propose. To this single idea must the revolution be ascribed, by which, after groping in the dark for so many centuries, natural science was at length conducted into the path of certain progress” ( CPR B XV)<sup>14</sup>

Whatever a Kant exegete may have to say about it, to me it seems important that Kant characterizes reason as an activity, and that he portrays that specific insight as a revolution in the history of thought. The “critique of pure reason” is a way of thinking that differs as much from its own history as the sure path does from groping around in the dark. Kant's criticism is in essence not a collection of propositions but rather a path that has an origin. This novelty, hence, comes about by a revolution locatable in history. At this point Kant famously borrows the example of the Copernican Revolution and lapses into narrating:

“Where propose to do just what Copernicus did in attempting to explain the celestial movements. When he found that he could make no progress by assuming that all the heavenly bodies revolved round the spectator, he reversed the process, and tried the experiment of assuming that the spectator revolved, while the stars remained at rest.”(CPR B XVI)<sup>15</sup>

It is irrelevant whether Kant describes the train of thought of Copernicus factually correctly; the fact is that he, by means of Copernicus, characterizes his own theory as the fruit of a historical action, which has a type in history. Revolutions are inherently historical. Or has there ever been a turning point without every thing revolving around it? In place and in time. The ebb and flow of events in time are the framework of what stands at the heart of thinking.(It should be

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<sup>14</sup>*The Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn, 14; <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/kant/Critique-Pure-Reason.pdf>

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 16.

noted that here in this term ‘revolution’ the transfer from the orbits of the celestial spheres to the revolution of thinking has already taken place. But that is another topic worth narrating.)

Michael Polanyi chose the Copernican Revolution for the opening of his book on “personal knowledge.” His aim was to show that thought brings with itself a non- thematic, personal framework. Polanyi summarizes the effect of this revolution as follows:

“... for those who embraced the Copernican system at an early stage committed themselves thereby to the expectation of an indefinite range of possible future confirmations of the theory, and this expectation was essential to their belief in the superior rationality and objective validity of the system.”<sup>16</sup>

The rationality of Copernicanism, defended by Polanyi as a scientist of the twentieth century, lies not in crude empiricism –clarifying that is Polanyi's primary intention– but rather in the potential of intellectual confirmation. At the same time, this potential is extrapolated into the future, such that for him it takes on a temporal dimension. The objectivity of science is its historicity. To further support that, Polanyi then describes the ‘framework’ as constitutive of scientific activity. Scientific controversy accordingly entails simultaneously understanding the intellectual framework of the other and refuting it. Whenever that happens with *ad hominem* arguments, it discredits the opponent but not the structure of the controversies in principle, because controversies necessarily engage in personal frameworks of argumentation.<sup>17</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn famously took up this idea or had a similar insight, and from that was able to describe the ‘structure of scientific revolutions.’<sup>18</sup> Without having to go into it further, it may be said that Kuhn's main interest lies right in the situation presented here, namely that ideas have a history and that they carry it with them.

Alasdair MacIntyre confirmed what has been said so far, especially regarding the history of science as a parallel to the history of philosophy, when he concluded his discussion of “The relationship of philosophy to its past,” whereby he also referred to Kuhn and Collingwood:

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<sup>16</sup>Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 5.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 151 f.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), numerous re-editions. Cf. Martin X. Moleski, SJ, “Polanyi vs. Kuhn: Worldviews Apart,” *Tradition & Discovery* 33, no. 2 (2007 2006): 8–24.

“It thus turns out that, just as the achievements of the natural sciences are in the end to be judged in terms of achievements of the history of those sciences, so the achievements of philosophy are in the end to be judged in terms of the achievements of the history of philosophy.”<sup>19</sup>

To judge the achievements of philosophy in terms of the achievements of the history of philosophy, to me, means to do history of philosophy in order to do philosophy proper and, specifically, to understand achievements of philosophy in the past. Many books and essays that advocate the history of philosophy as philosophy deal with individual cases of indebtedness and appropriation, but they tend to assume a teleological priority of philosophy, which almost always appears to be identical with current philosophy, as though there were such a thing without its history, and, consequently, those discussions do not take seriously the necessity to understand past thinkers as thinkers, and not as just past.<sup>20</sup>

#### **4. Each act of thinking takes place in a framework that is not itself thematic in the thought.**

Up until now, I have tried to make plausible that philosophical ideas and scientific theories are locatable in a historical framework. In doing so I have relied mainly on examples in which thinkers have pointed out that their philosophical idea was due to a story, and it was tacitly assumed by me as well as my witnesses that the idea as such has no history. The idea is evidently a *nunc stans*. But following Nietzsche and Polanyi we could read that the idea is but an act of thinking that has an origin and a destination. Polanyi was a chemist, and therefore it was self-evident for him that a scientific experiment only has validity if it can be reproduced. But since reproducing something extends over time, he could say that the historically extended verification constitutes the objectivity of ideas. So here lies a problem: on one hand, an idea is objective, if it

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<sup>19</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, “The relationship of philosophy to its past”, in *Philosophy in History. Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 30-48; 47. Cf. some objections raised by Tad Schmaltz, “What Has History of Science to Do with History of Philosophy?” in Mogens Lærke, Justin E. H. Smith, and Eric Schliesser, eds., *Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 301–323; 309-315. Schmaltz addresses philosophy as current practice of philosophers but fails to recognize the problem to lie in understanding past thinkers.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the review of the volume edited by Lærke, cited in the previous note: Stefan Heßbrüggen-Walter, “Book Reviews: Mogens Lærke, Justin E. H. Smith, Eric Schliesser (eds.), *Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 384 Pp.,” *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 143–62, doi:10.7761/JEMS.3.1.143.

is not bound merely to its 'time' (as we may assume in the case of witchcraft, which depended on early modern ideology); on the other hand, the idea is only as objective as the supporting 'framework' is valid in its time. And within this framework are included scientific hypotheses, perspectives on the object of research, the expectation of confirmation through further research, and thus overall the history of the research that has brought forth the idea. (What I call an idea here shall cover naturally both something like the Copernican system as well as transcendental philosophy.)

I think we can follow Polanyi's lead and talk about non-thematic components of ideas. Kant's thesis that it is human reason that inscribes its laws onto nature is explicitly timeless because otherwise we would indeed have to hope that every morning Mr. Kant or his assistant is cueing the sun to come up. And yet Kant has situated his thesis in a historical context. In this perspective, we could argue that the origin of transcendental philosophy is to transcendental philosophy itself as external as a dog to the moon. But Polanyi has even included in the idea the inward gratification and the inward expectation of historical verification. The non-thematic in a philosophical idea appears inexpressible and solipsistic. But as a framework it is at the same time external to the idea. It is characteristic that the framework, i.e., the assumptions, the horizon of expectation, the personal gratification, the incident by the fireplace and many others, does not itself belong to the theory. Thus, it is that one can opine that the history of science is a completely different discipline than the individual science and the laws of nature that are thematic within the discipline. An analogy would be the history of literature. Goethe was not a literary historian, and therefore his *Faust* has nothing to do with Agrippa of Nettesheim. Wrong: Goethe's Dr. Faust is obviously a reincarnation of the Renaissance magician - even if this is not thematic in the play. The fact that the genesis of an idea is not thematic in the mind does not thus contradict that this genesis has produced the idea.

##### **5. That which is external to ideas is what can be captured in stories.**

In a philosophical answer to a question, the question itself is no longer thematic. We can see this with puns:

When does the twelve-o'clock train leave? Answer: at noon.

Here immanent and external knowledge are reversed. The correct conversation: "At twelve noon" as a meaningful answer does not include – but instead presupposes - the question “When does the train leave?” The question is not thematic in the brief answer. Nevertheless, no one will want to demand that one should understand the answer without the question. Now, I could explain how and where I heard this pun about the twelve-o’clock train for the first time and hope that it makes even more sense why the example fits. But I have already given some examples that show that the philosopher himself had the suspicion that his idea gains its significance by way of context and pre-history.

At this point I should finally mention Aristotle, who has furnished the paradigm of the historicity of ideas in his doxographies.<sup>21</sup> His analysis of the ways of thinking of the pre-Socratic philosophers explicitly builds its philosophy from the endeavors of his predecessors by converting answers into questions. The triad of principles or the establishment of a science for its own sake, the quartet of causes, and the soul as the principle of life - all this was narrated as the outcome of a history of questions and answers. As soon as the ways of thinking of the pre-Socratics are no longer obvious and thematic in Aristotelian philosophy, they seem extraneous and must be told. That is what Aristotle does in his doxographies. To the extent that those chapters are to be read before the actual treatises, they seem like scholarly preliminaries that can be nonchalantly glossed over. As informs the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, doxographies are defined as

“works (or sections of works), taking as their subject matter the tenets or doctrines of the philosophers, rather than independent works of philosophy in which the author addresses in the first instance issues or topics of philosophy, with ancillary discussion along the way of the opinions of other philosophers.”<sup>22</sup>

The authors consider the doxographies exclusively as positivistic sources for lost ancient writings, in which sense they go no further than Hermann Diels. They completely fail to appreciate that the doxographies of Aristotle are part of philosophy.

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. André Laks, *Histoire, doxographie, vérité: Études sur Aristote, Théophraste et la philosophie présocratique* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters, 2007); particularly “Chapitre II - Histoire critique et doxographie. Pour une histoire de l'historiographie de la philosophie”, 13-26.

<sup>22</sup>Jaap Mansfeld, “Doxography of Ancient Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2013, 2013, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/doxography-ancient/>.

But Book Delta of *Metaphysics* should be a warning to us. It is just not so, that many terms that Aristotle elevates to philosophical concepts *pollachoslegeta i* (are said in various meanings). Aristotle distills philosophical concepts from the way peoples speak.<sup>23</sup> He shows the unspoken assumptions and cognitive strategies, for instance, when a Greek talks about *physis*, in order to extract from there and show forth the function of the concept in knowledge. This also means that he thematizes what is unthematic in concepts, so that it may be stored in the repository of possible meanings that can be retrieved if necessary. The Aristotelian concept of nature therefore still holds onto the hermeneutic dross that initially had made this concept philosophically operable. Aristotle's philosophical terminology tells the history of its genesis. For present-day philosophical research, this means that Aristotle cannot be mined like a quarry for philosophical terms by way of (in the bad sense) doxographically reporting his opinions, but that one can learn from him certain types of contextualization, of which the most important are based in the Greek history of ideas. It is unavoidable to tell how a philosophical idea came about while thinking the very idea.

The same can be seen with the medieval *quaestio* ("question"). For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas. It is evident that the so-called *corpus* of each article is a response to a question, since it starts with "respondeo". The so-called *objectiones* go ahead and present theses that do not represent the opinions of the author and that are dispensed with over the rest of the article. They are dispensed with initially through the "sed contra", which - in the language of Polanyi - establishes the framework that is not discussed further but indicates the leading perspective. Most often it is a quotation from the Bible or a statement of a Church Father - at any rate paradigms from history. The body of the article responds, literally, within the perspective to the question in the title of the *quaestio* with implicit or elaborated consideration of the opinions of others. What follows is a detailed response to the initial divergent opinions. A schoolboyish reading of such a *quaestio* could be content to learn the mere doctrine of the body. But to understand the philosophical idea, one must absolutely think along with the dissenting opinions. When one understands that the individual answers to the objections are only possible because the body has clarified the framework of understanding

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<sup>23</sup>Kurt von Fritz, *Philosophie und sprachlicher Ausdruck bei Demokrit, Plato und Aristoteles*. (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963). Wolfgang Wieland, *Die aristotelische Physik. Untersuchungen über die Grundlegung der Naturwissenschaft und die sprachlichen Bedingungen der Prinzipienforschung bei Aristoteles*, 2., durch ges. Aufl. (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1970).

and in doing so produced the answer, then it also becomes clear that it was the apparently false views that have produced the doctrine.

To call to mind an example: In the third article of the second *quaestio* of the *Summa I*, Thomas proves the existence of God in the famous five ways.<sup>24</sup> The first objection deals with the existence of evil, which would be excluded because the goodness of God, being infinite, would absorb all evil. The refutation cites Augustine, who said allowing evil rather confirms the omnipotence of God. Thomas endorses this argument but shifts it and finds that God can make good even out of evil. If one looks therefore to the body, the general answer, it becomes clear that Thomas has prepared his special response in the body and with it, already in the body, answers the objection. In this interpretation: what is the answer to the objection from evil? The answer is that deficiencies of any possible degree belong to a reality for which it is necessary to assume a highest degree of completeness, a first principle, and a governance. And this we call God. This answer also applies to evil. Aquinas' answer to the question of evil not only solves this problem thanks to his philosophizing with Augustine, it also makes his arguments for the existence of God more intelligible.

### **6. How can one detect in a philosophical problem its history?**

So this is a particularly good example of how we can think with the head of another. Scholasticism of all schools provides us with the paradigm. It is impossible to think an idea (like that of evil) without thinking its history. If we understand a thesis, whether plausible or not, to be the answer to a question, then we understand what the philosopher may have thought, and by doing that, we contextualize the thesis and – most importantly – we understand our problem properly. Cusanus has pointed out for us the world-historical context of his learned ignorance. But even if he may not have thought in historical terms, he nevertheless urged his readers to consider the context. We do not at all need to assume that philosophers like Aristotle had a philosophy of history. But they have time and again pointed emphatically to the contexts of their thinking. History is a context of thinking, and probably the most important of all. To think with

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Paul Richard Blum, “Gottes Plan: Von der Physikotheologie zur Theophysik”, in Paul Richard Blum, *Das Wagnis, ein Mensch zu sein: Geschichte - Natur - Religion. Studien zur neuzeitlichen Philosophie*, Philosophie: Forschung und Wissenschaft 31 (Münster: Lit, 2010), 281–294, first in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 109 (2002) 271–282.

the head of another is therefore in philosophy so much as to understand the history of a specific idea and only in this way to understand the idea.

Here is perhaps the opportunity to speak briefly to the idea of progress in the history of philosophy. Kant presenting himself as a revolutionary in the history of thinking of nature could indeed be understood as a *Whig History*, according to which the predecessors are considered from the standpoint of how they were so advanced to have contributed to its own current thinking.<sup>25</sup> But neither was it Kant's intention, nor would it be a feat of thinking with the head of another; on the contrary, it would only be a projection of one's own head onto history. When we read the history of philosophy as answers to questions, then we look for our own thinking in those who have come before, but so that they come into their own. Whig History is unilinear in principle, so that the past only points toward the present. To think with the head of the predecessor requires, however, to be able to reverse the direction so that the present leads back to history.

Once it is clear that Mr. Descartes did not really believe he had shaken out of his head everything he learned in school, we can also interpret this gesture as a strong indicator for the necessity to point out in a dialectical way the historicity of thought: Precisely in that the thinker insists that his idea is not conditioned by history he bidsto turn back again to the conditions and circumstances, as soon as the intended pure idea, the thesis, is understood, in order to understand the theory as an answer to a question and thus be able to appreciate it even better. The reference to his own experience and the very peculiar personal situation symbolize this unconditionedness. This is - as already mentioned - the myth about the philosophy of the philosophers, in which the philosopher stands up with his own person for the truth of thought: Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. The paradox of this fireplace-gesture is, yes, that the situation is flagrantly contingent. What if Descartes had frozen that night? We also must not overlook the fact that the story of the

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<sup>25</sup>Wilfred M. McClay, "Of Ashtrays and Incommensurability: Reflections on Herbert Butterfield and The Whig Interpretation of History," *Fides et Historia* 44, no. 1 (2012): 1–14. There p. 5: „Butterfield defined ‘Whig’ history as an approach to the past that makes its meaning and its lessons entirely subservient to the demands of the present, and to the present’s regnant idea of what constitutes ‘progress.’ Whig history was history written by and for the winners in historical conflict and change, and as such, it always upheld the present’s sense of itself as a great and unmistakable and inevitable advance upon all the things that preceded it.“ See also Paul Richard Blum, *Studies on Early Modern Aristotelianism*, Scientific and Learned Cultures and Their Institutions 30/7 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), chapt. 8: “The Jesuits and the Janus-Faced History of Natural Science”, S. 113. Cf. Richard Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres,” in *Philosophy in History. Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 49–75. On this see Laks, 22-26.

fireplace itself is not part of the philosophy. How can a philosopher prove the non-temporality of his thought by narrowing it into a very personal and random moment? It comes to pass that the usual conditionality of thought in history switches places with the interiority of the person - but just as a matter of method, that is, as an appeal to consider the dialectic of historicity and validity. To give a contemporary example, John R. Searle claims in his book *Intentionality*, that he was not at all interested in "all this distinguished past": my only hope of resolving the worries which led me into the study (...) lay in the relentless pursuit of my own investigation."<sup>26</sup> Since we do not want to insinuate infinite egocentrism to Searle, this thesis can only say: Look at my studies, and then go back into history and see if I have been able to contribute something lasting. So from a non-philosophical gesture we can know that we are called to go after the history of an idea and contextualize it again, after we have understood the intention of the author. Then, however, we will be sure to appreciate the thesis of the thinker as a moment in the history of thought - and can criticize it.

Two examples from the Renaissance come to mind: Pietro Pomponazzi and Francesco Patrizi. In the opening of their treatises they both tell a story that points to the contingency of life and the randomness of thought. Both authors maintain that they were sick. It is no small matter that one writes on immortality and the other on the essence of history, namely, on one question of eternal truth and another question of contingency of truth. What a coincidence! Pomponazzi is visited during his illness and asked by a good friend, a Dominican friar, to comment on whether the opinion of the Dominican Thomas Aquinas is compatible with that of Aristotle. The particular issue is what Pomponazzi thinks about it - "in the absence of revelation and miracles, but much more for pure persistence within the natural limits" - and also, what is the authentic teaching of Aristotle.<sup>27</sup> The explicit comparison of the Aristotelian with Aristotle must have been enough to convince any reader that Pomponazzi's theory of the soul has a history. By the scene of the sickbed we could be misled to misunderstand Pomponazzi's teaching as just idiosyncratic brooding. But we may certainly assume that the reference to his sickness is meant to signify that Pomponazzi is not speaking here *ex cathedra* as a professor, despite the fact that the bulk of the

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<sup>26</sup>John R. Searle, *Intentionality, an Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), ix.

<sup>27</sup>Pietro Pomponazzi, "On the Immortality of the Soul," in Cassirer, Ernst, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall (eds.), *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man: Selections in Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 280–381; 281.

essay is written in strict scholastic style. On the other hand, the foreword also mentions that - for whatever reason - many people were present at the conversation. A break with tradition and the opening of a new school of thought? Maybe so. But perhaps also what Polanyi has brought out: the objectivity of philosophy consists in the manner of rationality that finds its place in history and anticipates verification in the future. So how do we recognize the historicity of a philosophical theory? By taking note of the contingent circumstances of philosophizing. In this historical situatedness there is no yes or no, no pure physicalism (as Pomponazzi suggests) and no pure dogmatism of Revelation (as he likewise seems to suggest). Instead, there is thought in its history.

Patrizi uses the same staging in his dialogues about history. In the chapter where Patrizi examines the humanistic question from a Neoplatonic vantage point, he pretends to be sick. He claims to his visitors to be able to read in the book of his soul where everything is written, since it is written by the hand of God. This is of course a high standard, but Patrizi explains at once that in essence every human soul has such a book and can read it.

“Since there is an infinity of people who always look outside and never turn their eyes into themselves, it is impossible for them to know that they have in themselves this divine script written by the hand of God.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus the precondition is given, on the basis of which Patrizi defines, in Platonic tradition, history as memory. Precisely because history appears as something ephemeral and humanly arbitrary, Patrizi presents it as anchored in Neoplatonic epistemology. However, the truth of history does not vanish into any lofty hypostasis; rather, the author stresses that history is virtually within every individual and therefore available to a hermeneutic, which must be carried out by real, actual people who naturally are only interested in the external, that is, in the mere facts that can be narrated. The "Divine Script" is the essence of history. To concern oneself with it appears

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<sup>28</sup>Francesco Patrizi, *Della historia: diecedialoghi* (In Venetia: Appresso Andrea Arrivabene, 1560), 13: “La onde, essendovi infiniti di quegliuomini, chesempre guardano all’infuora, et non mairivolgonogliocchi in se medesimi, egli è impossibil cosa, che essi pure sappiano di havere in se, questa fatta per la mano di Dio divina scrittura.” Quoted from Eckhard Keßler (ed), *Theoretiker humanistischer Geschichtsschreibung: Nachdruck exemplarischer Texte aus dem 16. Jahrhundert*, Humanistische Bibliothek Reihe 2, Bd. 4 (München: Fink, 1971) (original page numbers). On Patrizi’s concept of history see Paul Richard Blum, “Francesco Patrizi in the ‘Time Sack’: History and Rhetorical Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61 (2000) 59-74.

pretty crazy to Patrizi's visitors, that is, those who erroneously believe history and truth to be two distinct things.

