

# think.

Musings of a philosopher & Sanskritist.

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Saturday, December 20, 2014

## What is "History of Philosophy"?

Since my lengthy comment at the [Indian Philosophy Blog](#) is practically a post, I'll reproduce it here. It's in response to Matt Dasti asking:

So, what makes something "history of philosophy" such that it need be distinguished from some other way of framing it (e.g., simply epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, or the close study of this or that thinker)? Is there a good set of criteria, or at least rough guidelines that work? Or must we simply come to the same conclusion we do with many labels or concepts: they are simply a shorthand that we use, knowing full well that they are sloppy and problematic, but for which there are no easy substitutes or fixes. Or, finally, is this distinction between history of philosophy and philosophy proper pernicious and akin to other sorts of problems that the cosmopolitan impulse seeks to shun?

There's a nice collection of essays on this topic published by OUP: *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy*. Gary Hatfield has written a piece called "The History of Philosophy as Philosophy" which argues that analytic philosophy has, in actuality, been more "historical" than philosophers with "anti-historical" attitudes would have it. He then sets out a few ways in which we use past texts (and explores them in the context of history of early modern philosophy):

1. **Inspiration** – not trying to represent an author's arguments but just to find something which prompts ideas
2. **Non-contextual fixer-upper** – looking for answers to current philosophical problems without attention to historical context (he cites Strawson's reading of Kant's Critique as an example)
3. **Historically sensitive fixer-upper** – reading past texts with a sensitivity to historical context, still using them to solve present problems
4. **Radically historicist** – aiming to understand a text as an expression of the culture without making any further connections, since past standards of evaluation are incommensurable with current ones
5. **Genealogical** – understanding past philosophical positions with a careful eye to their historical context will help us not inappropriately import misinterpretations into current debate, and also understand philosophical development (an example is Kant's notion of analyticity compared to more recent ones)
6. **Assumption-challenging** – understanding the past in a historically sensitive manner can reveal hidden assumptions that have not been argued for (an example is Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, though Hatfield criticizes Rorty's project in the essay)

I think we would want to reject (1) and (2) as being "history of philosophy", since the fact that the texts are in the past is non-essential and their historical context is not part of the project.



**Malcolm Keating**

I defended my dissertation in the philosophy department at the University of Texas at Austin in November 2014. In it, I focus on theories of non-literal speech in Indian and analytic philosophy. Before coming to Austin, I earned my master's degree in philosophy at the University of Missouri - St. Louis. In Fall 2015, I will be joining the faculty of Yale-NUS College in Singapore as Assistant Professor of Philosophy.

My research employs historical philosophy in the service of philosophy as a whole. More specifically, my work engages with the classical Indian philosophical tradition as well as contemporary Anglophone (analytic) philosophy of language. I'm interested in questions concerning language, meaning, and knowledge.

When I'm not doing philosophy, I'm taking photographs, biking, or at the park with my dog.

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(3) is one of the most common approaches to doing history of philosophy, for a number of reasons. I think of Amartya Sen's description of the "curatorial approach" to studying India here ("Indian Traditions and the Western Imagination"). If past texts (or texts from another philosophical tradition) are too similar—that is, they run into some of the same dialectical dead-ends as contemporary work—then they're of no use. They need to be different enough that they resolve our problems. "What is the use of finding another Russell or Frege or Descartes?" Etc.

Of course, while the texts/philosophers need to be different enough to solve our problems, they cannot be so distinct from our concerns as to not be conversational partners. Otherwise, all we are doing is history (as in (4)) and not philosophy.

As Stephen Harris and others have pointed out [Catarina Dutilh Novaes's piece](#), I don't need to—but for those of us working in Indian philosophy, this kind of genealogical project (Hatfield's (5)) is not going to be precisely what we're doing, at least insofar as we might be wanting to also look at contemporary texts. For some of the work we do, there is no historically grounded conceptual genealogy linking, say, 9th century Sanskrit texts to current work in philosophy of mind (well, this is probably false, strictly speaking, but such genealogies would be different than what she has in mind, perhaps). However, one way to think of historical work in Indian philosophy is that it is exploring counterfactual historical development. As Novaes says, "the historical development of concept X could have taken a rather different turn at some point or another. If this had been the case, then its current instantiations might have become something quite different." So, then, doing careful work in the history of Indian philosophy can help us to see these different turns actually fleshed out. However, like (3), (5) in this way makes Indian philosophy counterfactual to contemporary philosophy. If the metaphor is of actual v possible worlds, we are still treating historical/non-Western texts as the marked, as the less "real", etc.

Hatfield explicitly notes that his list is not exhaustive, and that there are going to be a variety of approaches. I think that even within the same project, a number of methods would be employed. For me, at least (6) is less a method than a goal, one which is extremely difficult to do well, since it involves careful historical reading of two contexts, bridging them, and doing constructive philosophy that identifies assumptions and explores them.

Last point (sorry, this has gotten long—I'd recommend the book and its articles to anyone interested in this topic) is that there are different units of philosophical analysis. So we might do history of philosophy with regard to a single text, a textual tradition, a philosopher's textual output, or thematically. This puts us in a position to think carefully about things like the distinctions between "traditions" (here I am especially considering the question of the porousness of the 'darśana-s', something I have been thinking about a lot) and more generally, how philosophy proceeds.

History of philosophy, then, done well, includes meta-philosophy, philosophy "proper", history, and philosophy of language, insofar as we think about context, interpretation, etc. So, no, I wouldn't want to distinguish it too strictly from philosophy—and I think making clearer the philosophical robustness of what we do is important to respond to the disparagement that Andrew Ollett quite rightly identifies.

Posted by [Malcolm Keating](#) at [10:04 AM](#)

Labels: [Amartya Sen](#), [Catarina Dutilh Novae](#), [Gary Hatfield](#), [history of philosophy](#), [Indian philosophy](#), [metaphilosophy](#), [methodology](#)

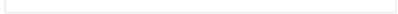
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