On Reading the History of Philosophy: Comments on David Concepción's "Reading Philosophy with Background Knowledge and Metacognition"

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David Concepción's "Reading Philosophy with Background Knowledge and Metacognition" features a useful handout, easily adapted, which encourages better reading by undergraduates. Perhaps its best aspect is how Concepción encourages metacognition. Students are instructed to reflect on what they can expect from a reading, whether they have mastered its content, and which of their beliefs are challenged by its claims.

Such metacognitive prompts help instructors cope with the diversity of background knowledge in the typical philosophy classroom. Among the background information Concepción asks students to consider is the nature of the course for which a reading is assigned. He distinguishes three kinds of classes: problem-based, historical, and figure-based. His featured handout is aimed at students in classes of the first type.

> This is a problem-based class. In problem-based classes, students spend most of their time identifying, reflecting upon, and defending their beliefs. This is *not* a historical or figure-based course. In historical classes, students spend most of their time learning certain themes in the history of philosophy. In figure-based classes, students spend most of their time mastering what certain philosophers think.
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> In problem-based courses like this one, students read relatively short primary and secondary sources.[1]

By distinguishing between problem-based classes and historical or figure-based classes, Concepción may be taken as distinguishing ways in which one reads philosophy. When we are attempting to master the work of a particular philoso-

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pher, we may be less interested in evaluating it as we are in practicing hagiography or interpretation. Similarly, when we read the history of philosophy, we may act less as philosophers, interpreting and evaluating arguments, than as historians or sociologists, cataloguing the distal ideas of past cultures.

I briefly argue here that the view of historical and figure-based study as discontinuous with problem-based study in philosophy is wrong. I believe that this mistaken view is common. It is consistent with the distinction that Concepción makes in his handout but it is not essential or even central to Concepción's work. Indeed, Concepción's handout is just as useful for historical and figure-based classes as for problem-based ones.

If reading for problem-based classes should be different from reading for historical classes, we may wonder how to adapt Concepción's handout for classes of other types. To answer that question, we had better have a handle on why we are teaching historical material.

In two compelling articles, David Rosenthal presents a conundrum for those of us who believe that reading the history of philosophy is beneficial for undergraduates.[2] In contemporary philosophy, like contemporary science, we search for solutions to particular problems.[3] Failed views from the past seem irrelevant. Scientists do not, for example, read Galileo's work as central to their research and do not generally include it in their teaching of contemporary problems. Instead of forcing students to work through old mistakes, philosophers could, like scientists and mathematicians, just present the current state of affairs, the best versions of contemporary epistemology, or ethics, or philosophy of mind.

Despite the similarities in the practices of contemporary philosophy and science, aiming at correct solutions to live problems, the history of philosophy plays a central role in undergraduate philosophy education in ways that the history of science does not. In studying the history of philosophy, philosophers are more like those who work in the arts or humanities, in which study of the history of a field is integral to the study of that field. Musicians study the history of music and literature majors study the history of literature. But such disciplines do not centrally aim at the truth. The central goals of the study of art and literature include understanding a given work, placing it in its historical context, and grasping the culture out of which it is produced. Music students study Bach and art students study Cezanne to improve their skills. Rosenthal's conundrum is that philosophy seems to straddle the humanities and the sciences in a puzzling way. It is not a cultural phenomenon like art or literature; we aim to solve problems, like scientists. Yet we study history like scholars in the arts and humanities. Without an explanation of why we study history, we are left to wonder why we teach the history of philosophy and thus how we should teach students to read it.

To put the problem in perspective, consider a course in modern philosophy scheduled to examine Berkeley's claim that there is no material world, Leibniz's

claim that this is the best of all possible worlds, and Hume's claim that we lack knowledge of scientific laws. Such claims seem to be obviously false. Yet instructors in such courses ordinarily approach the relevant texts in order to evaluate them not merely for their historical interest, but for their truth. We take the arguments seriously. The historian or sociologist of ideas may regard the claims of Berkeley and others as intriguing artifacts. The philosopher engages Berkeley as if he were a contemporary, interpreting his arguments with a view to assessing them.

The philosophical approach to history seems absurd to some students who disdain wasting their time with false views. The historian and the sociologist can agree with such students without denigrating their own work: it is a historical and sociological fact, available to study, that certain folks defended certain beliefs. But a student's philosophical education will be judged by how well she or he can put aside her or his distaste for such views and evaluate the arguments.

Rosenthal dismisses several quick and easy explanations of philosophers' study of history. We do not study history as a source of ideas; we are better off looking at contemporary work directly. While reading history can be salutary as a compendium of errors to avoid, we can instruct students to avoid such errors without digging into the past. The perspective we gain by seeing a wider diversity of viewpoints may be useful, but does not seem to result in tangible benefit to contemporary philosophers.

Instead, Rosenthal presents three more subtle and defensible accounts of the importance of studying the history of philosophy. First, the broad systems developed by older philosophers, in contrast to narrowly-focused contemporary work, allow us to see connections among areas that are now ordinarily seen separately. While academia becomes increasingly fractured, the great systems-builders wrote comprehensively about science, ethics, metaphysics, theology, and mathematics. Studying history allows us to see connections among areas of philosophy that our contemporaries treat as independent.

Second, Rosenthal notes that in order to understand historical work, we have to interpret it through our own beliefs about what is true. Even when they use familiar vocabulary, a philosopher's words may have subtle, profound, and unanticipated implications. Further, our understanding of the words in a text must be balanced with a charitable interpretation of the claims and arguments in the philosopher's work. A student confronting Berkeley's claim that he, unlike Locke, is the champion of common sense is forced to balance the details of the texts with an interpretation of Berkeley's broader view. That is tricky and sophisticated work and it requires that the reader both interpret and evaluate a range of claims. Reading philosophy requires honing our own views about the truth in order to sustain proper charity.

Third, Rosenthal claims that reading the history of philosophy helps us see how to transcend the question-begging assumptions that all systems-builders make. We may see how an implicit assumption can be avoided or how what seems to be

a central problem is not. This is not just avoiding a list of errors, but learning how to interpret and evaluate underlying assumptions in all eras and areas.

With these three suggestions in mind, let's turn to the details of Concepción's handout. If there is an important distinction among types of classes and students are supposed to alter the way they read because of their metacognitive awareness of their type of class, there should be some difference in the ways in which we read historical and problem-based philosophy. But some of Concepción's advice is applicable to all kinds of courses and the advice which applies specifically to philosophy classes extends to philosophy classes of all types.

The advice applicable to any class includes counsel to read in good conditions, to pre-read and re-read, and to take notes. Some of the metacognitive questions which Concepción asks students to consider are also generally applicable. In pre-reading students in all classes should be aware of the distinctions between primary and secondary texts, be alert to the distinction between arguments and descriptions of arguments, and look for theses.

Turning to advice which appears to be specific to philosophy courses, Concepción tells students that the ultimate goal of reading philosophy is to develop their belief systems. There are, certainly, some ways to teach the history of philosophy which do not challenge students' beliefs. But reading history without engaging what we actually believe is philosophically pointless. If Rosenthal is correct, the tasks of interpretation and evaluation are inevitably linked.

More specifically, Concepción instructs students in problem-based classes to evaluate an author's arguments before class and advises them to try to explain how the author defends his or her conclusion. One might think that this assignment would be too difficult in history classes; the history of philosophy is full of cases in which such explanations are exceedingly difficult to formulate. For example, as Jonathan Bennett writes of Spinoza's *Ethics*, "[F]or certain of his deepest and most central doctrines he offers 'demonstrations' that are unsalvageably invalid and of no philosophical use or interest; it is not credible that he accepts those doctrines because he thinks they follow from the premisses of those arguments."[4]

The historian or sociologist of Spinoza's work may, perhaps even properly, avoid such difficulties. He or she may, for example, speculate on Spinoza's biography instead, and its effects on Spinoza's views. But the philosophy student must struggle with Spinoza's text just as he or she would with contemporary material. He or she must find the arguments and assess them. We do no philosophical good for our students if we absolve them of that work.

Concepción further asks students to consider whether they have been charitable in their interpretations, to ask themselves if the conclusions in the text are well defended or persuasive, and to challenge themselves to find counter-examples. He asks them to engage personally with the material, seeking what bothers them about conclusions they dislike and asking how the author might respond. Students are

advised to think about which beliefs of their own they must change if the conclusions of the reading are true.

Again, all of these suggestions are important for courses in history, especially given Rosenthal's analysis of the importance of reading history. Rosenthal's central claim is that charitable interpretation of a text is intricately linked to one's own estimation of the truths of its claims. If we approach the history of philosophy without challenging and refining our own views, without doing the hard work that Concepción rightly urges students in contemporary problem-based courses to do, we will be unable to interpret and understand the texts.

If the point of historical and figure-based classes is as Rosenthal claims, then the distinction between problem-based and historical or figure-based classes seems untenable. We read the history of philosophy in order to think about connections among the views that a problem-based class takes as separate. We read the history of philosophy to hone our skills in interpretation, essential skills for reading all philosophy. And we read the history of philosophy to see how our belief systems may be improved by avoiding contentious assumptions. Problem-based and historical classes require the same skills of interpretation and evaluation.

Still, even if the way one reads philosophy is uniform across class types, there may be some differences among courses. Much of the importance of reading history lies in training students in charitable interpretation. One cannot interpret a broad system charitably by reading short excerpts. Rosenthal thus suggests that instructors provide substantial reading assignments.

Perhaps here, then, is a real difference between the historical course and the problems-based one. In a problem-based class, we may serve our students best by asking them to read just enough to motivate discussion. Efficient descriptions of, say, the problem of egoism in moral philosophy, may be better assignments than extended examinations of its treatment over time. In contrast, if we are examining Spinoza's metaphysics, the views on freedom and virtue we find in the fourth and fifth parts of the *Ethics* are difficult to interpret charitably without a close examination of the propositions concerning the nature of substance in the first part. What differs may be not how we read but how much we read.

All philosophy reading involves interpretation and evaluation. Some readers of some philosophers require more attention to the interpreting stage or proceed more quickly to the evaluating phase. But the balance does not vary so much with chronology as with the particular content and reader. I spend more time on interpretation reading Dummett or McDowell than I do reading Hume or Mill.

Concepción's sage advice to encourage metacognition thus carries over neatly to students reading history, as do his responses to questions about apparent contradictions, how to be aware of the underlying dialogue in philosophy texts, and loquaciousness. Reading the history of philosophy, if done for the right reasons, is no different from reading philosophy.

Notes

1. David W. Concepción, "Reading Philosophy with Background Knowledge and Metacognition," in *Philosophy Through Teaching*, ed. Emily Esch, Kevin Hermberg, and Rory E. Kraft, Jr. (Charlottesville, VA: Philosophy Documentation Center, 2014), 91–107, 99.

2. David Rosenthal, "Philosophy and Its History," in *The Institution of Philosophy*, ed. Avner Cohen and Marcelo Dascal (Peru, IL: Open Court Press, 1989), 141–176; and David Rosenthal, "Philosophy and Its Teaching," in *A Teacher's Life Essays for Steven M. Cahn*, ed. Robert B. Talisse and Maureen Eckert (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 67–83.

3. There are, of course, alternatives to this dominant approach.

4. Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 113.