

Some reflections on method in the history of philosophy

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If my own experience is any sort of guide, there is an unfortunate irony – perhaps more accurately, there is an unseemly audacity – in my leading off today’s events by talking about historiographical method. My impression is that historians of medieval philosophy are, by and large, the most prone to be completely unreflective about issues of method. The scholars of ancient and early modern philosophy that I know, present company most definitely included, are all well aware of the different ways in which, and purposes for which, scholarship in the history of philosophy can be carried on. They have their assessments of what makes for good scholarship and what makes for the other kind, and they can both articulate and defend those assessments at some length. Pose such questions to a medievalist, however, and you’re likely to get a bit of stammering and then a quick change of subject.

Worse yet, among these sinners I am perhaps the chief. I have long practiced the history of philosophy in the same way in which I have played the organ. I’m a decent enough organist, but I don’t have the slightest clue how an organ’s internal workings go. That’s probably fine for service-playing purposes, since I can get the sounds I want without knowing how they’re produced. Plus, those sounds are helpfully predetermined for me by Mr Bach. In my scholarly life, of course, there’s no score from which I can decipher my desired results. It helps to have a target at which to aim, as Aristotle said in a kindred context, and some notion of what the history of philosophy is all about would surely provide such a target, along with guidance about how best to ensure that one hits it.

So I present myself this morning not as an expert with wisdom to impart, but as a neophyte reflecting on his own practice with a view toward getting clearer on the vision of philosophical historiography that underlies it and thereby, perhaps, improving that practice. The paper will fall into two tenuously connected parts. The first part contains a general

reflection on method that I wrote a few years back which has since been published in Czech but has not had any circulation in the Anglophone world. I venture to repeat these observations here because I haven't thought better of them in the meantime, though many of you, I feel sure, will think that I should have. The second part takes up a case study. Having just finished a book on Anselm, I wanted to talk about the current state of historiographical method in Anselm scholarship and see what lessons, if any, can be derived from what I've found in my journeys through the secondary literature.

Imagine that someone has just finished giving a talk on some historical figure in philosophy — say, Aristotle. Someone in the audience raises her hand and says, “But you've got Aristotle wrong. His actual view is . . .” and then she offers some textual evidence or what have you for the claim that the lecturer has Aristotle wrong.

The lecturer's reply will fall into one of two types. The first type will say, “Well, maybe Aristotle didn't really hold p , but surely p is worth talking about for its own sake.” The second type will say something like “I read that passage differently, and here's why” or “But here's this other passage where Aristotle says something opposed to what you say he says.”

I have no further interest in talking about lecturers of the first type. Whatever they are doing, it is not the history of philosophy. Let them be unto us as heathen men and publicans. What interests me is lecturers of the second type, which is to say, genuine historians of philosophy. I want to point out how very different are the approaches that historians of philosophy take to their subject matter. “Getting S right” — where S is the philosopher under consideration — is the shared goal of them all. But why it matters that we get S right, and how one goes about getting S right, are contentious issues. Let me state from the outset that I do not intend to argue for the superiority of one approach over others. I will criticize some abuses of each approach, but I will criticize them *as* abuses. I will also explain the approach I take in my own work — once again, not because I think my approach is intrinsically superior to others,

but just so people will know what they can, and what they cannot, expect from me. I have profited from reading work that represents a broad range of approaches.

At one extreme (an ideal type, perhaps not instantiated) is the historian who regards himself as “a curator in the museum of ideas.” (I owe the phrase to D. S. Hutchinson.) The aim of a historian of philosophy on this view is to dust off the accretions of misunderstanding that have accumulated on a philosopher over the centuries and display him in his pristine condition, properly labeled and catalogued, and carefully displayed in his historical context. This sort of historian has no official interest in the plausibility of the views thus displayed, the success of the arguments deployed to support them, or the possibility of bringing the philosopher into some contemporary discussion. I say he has no *official* interest in these matters. He may well have an unofficial interest in them. He probably has philosophical views (he is, after all, housed in a philosophy department) and is interested in philosophical assessment. But he regards all such concerns as alien to the properly historical enterprise. The curator of an automotive museum is concerned with the development of the cars in his collection, and no doubt he drives a car of his own; but he never takes his exhibits out for a spin.

At the other extreme (another ideal type, perhaps not instantiated) is the historian who reads older philosophy in just the same spirit in which her non-historical colleague reads the current journals. No doubt the arguments one finds there *have* a historical context, and maybe even a genetic explanation in extra-philosophical terms. Think, for example, of the overwhelmingly naturalist bent of much of contemporary philosophy. No doubt one can explain it — in one sense of ‘explain’ — by noting such historical influences as the stunning success of the natural sciences, the secularization of Anglo-American culture, and what not. But the metaphysician down the hall does not suppose that his understanding of the latest article in *The Journal of Philosophy* will be enriched by a meditation on such broad developments. Of course, there are likely to be arguments in the paper that are directed at particular views put forward by others. But one doesn’t even need to know who those others are in order to get out of the article whatever is worth getting. One certainly doesn’t need to know that the views

being refuted are common, that they are supported by philosophers of type x and rejected by those of type y , or that they are suggested by parallel developments in discipline d or cultural phenomenon ϕ . A historian of this type will scoff at suggestions that she needs to explore the institutional context of Duns Scotus's thought or the religious roots of Kant's philosophy. If something about context is important to Duns Scotus or Kant, she will say, then we'll find it in the arguments. The point is always to understand what's at issue philosophically, not to understand how what's at issue came to be at issue.

Actual historians of philosophy probably all fall somewhere on a spectrum between these two extremes, but my impression is that very many historians are clustered precariously close to the ends. I won't engage in the admittedly delightful enterprise of classifying other scholars, but it's no great secret that my own work is close, and sometimes very close, to the second extreme. As a friendly but firm reviewer pointed out, I once managed to write an introduction to an Anselm translation with so little historical stage-setting that I didn't even think to mention Anselm's *dates*. When I read one of Duns Scotus's attacks on Henry of Ghent, I don't even care whether Scotus actually got Henry right. (Scotus doesn't seem to have cared, so why should I?) When I read one of Ockham's attacks on Scotus, though, I do care whether Ockham got Scotus right. The reason is that I like Scotus. I think he gets the big things right — ask me about univocity some time — and I think he's brilliant. And this points up another shortcoming of historians in my own neighborhood. Our philosophical leanings can easily lead us to scrimp on the historian's proper task. Since what we're really interested in is the philosophy, we are tempted to blow right past arguments that don't seem philosophically fruitful to us, even though our author may have worn out several scribes in the course of his dictation of that argument. A historian nearer the opposite end of the spectrum will try to figure out what that argument is doing there — he doesn't care that the argument in question is no good — and will not rest content until he can explain its appearance, probably in historical terms. And it should go without saying (except that folks in my neighborhood ignore the fact) that the explanation is altogether likely to cast light on our author, even to illuminate the arguments that we *did* find interesting for our own purposes. In short, the work we are

tempted to shirk is likely to be of service in helping us get the author right: which is, remember, the goal of everyone in all the neighborhoods. (Remember always that those who do not have this goal are in no neighborhood at all, but have been cast into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.)

Philosophical partisanship leads to outright abuse of history when, as it sometimes does, it encourages the historian to mangle the views of an author. An example of this is the “If he’d just thought harder, he would have been Kant” phenomenon. (A friend of mine reports that an extremely important moral philosopher once said this of a figure covered in a seminar my friend took on the British Moralists.) More than one recent history of moral philosophy has treated predecessors to Kant as if they are best understood as groping towards the Kantian view that the historians obviously take to be the most philosophically interesting or defensible moral theory. No doubt without meaning to, they misapply words that — read by us, now, from our post-Kantian vantage point — can be taken as saying strikingly proto-Kantian things, but which in the authors’ actual historical context had to mean something very different. This is the sort of abuse that makes me especially grateful to historians near the opposite end of the spectrum, who are robustly aware that philosophers are always responding to their contemporaries and immediate predecessors, not groping mystically toward some determinate future enlightenment.

On the other hand, historians near that end of the spectrum sometimes make claims for the importance of historical context in getting an author right that strike my sort of historian as grossly exaggerated. I’ll probably be shunned for saying so, but I’ve never seen a detailed discussion of Augustine’s encounter with the neo-Platonists that I thought shed the slightest light on Augustine’s actual thought. The reason, though, is that Augustine was (by the standards of anyone this side of outer darkness) a perfectly dreadful reader of the neo-Platonists. He may have had Plotinus in front of him, but what he read there was textbook middle-period Plato. So we don’t need to know Plotinus to understand Augustine better; we don’t even need to know which bits of Plotinus Augustine had seen. What we need to know is what Augustine got from Plotinus, in a sense of ‘got’ that doesn’t imply it was actually there

before Augustine got it. And what that was, Augustine tells us himself. In contrast, some historical figures actually were good readers, and in their case attention to historical context is much more likely to be of service. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the proof of the relevance of historical context is in its actual illumination of the philosopher under investigation. What I call the plop-and-point method is an abuse. That's the method one sees in any number of books in the history of philosophy, in which there is an opening chapter or two on predecessor x or historical development y , followed by a discussion of the principal topic of the book in which the relevance of the historical context is utterly indiscernible. The author has plopped down some history, pointed to it, and then proceeded as if he had never done anything of the sort. Bad historians of my type would never write the opening chapters. Good historians of the other type would write them, and then take care to show how they make a difference later on.

The popularity of the plop-and-point method leads me to suspect, in fact, that sometimes the demand for historical context is simply a demand for *additional facts*, whether those facts help at all in the project of getting the author right. "Tell me about the institutional setting, the social currents, the ecclesiastical politics, of the author's time." Well, why? Because it will help us get the author right, or because you just happen to find such things interesting? If you demand a chapter on S 's intellectual milieu because there's no understanding his views without it, then the demand is legitimate. If you demand it just because that's the sort of thing every treatment of S ought to have, then it's not.

That is, I do understand the task of the historian of philosophy as different from that of the intellectual historian or historian of ideas. To demand from a historian of philosophy a discussion of historical matters that cannot be shown to illuminate the philosophical content of an author is to import standards extraneous to his proper project. ('Proper' here does not mean "demanded by propriety," but "pertaining to his distinctive role." My whole point here is that there is nothing wrong with extra-philosophical history, but that it is indeed extra-philosophical. My view about dealing with such matters is like the traditional Anglican view of auricular confession: All may, some should, none must.) Individual historians of

philosophy may of course also be more generally interested in intellectual, social, ecclesiastical, and political history, and so they may themselves wish to write histories in which the object of their philosophical studies is shown against a broader historical background. But historians of philosophy with narrower interests should not be faulted for sticking closely to their job description.

The upshot is simply this: sometimes historical context is illuminating, in the sense that it contributes to getting the author right, and sometimes it's not. The reflexive complaint that "you haven't put this in historical context" is methodologically unsound, and reflexive treatment of philosophical arguments as if they emerged out of the philosopher's head in some history-proof isolation booth is methodologically unsound as well. But between these two extremes there is surely room for a variety of approaches. Some will be more drawn to the curatorial side of the history of philosophy, others to the argumentative side. "Let there be in us no discord, but one spirit."

My aim here is irenic, not polemical. But I can't resist closing this part of the paper with a question that suggests why I've taken up residence in my particular neighborhood. Do you think your understanding of what I have said in this section, or your assessment of its merits, would be at all enhanced if you knew specifically what prompted me to write it?

On to the second part of this paper. My energies over the last two years and more have been concentrated on the thought of Anselm of Canterbury. I am co-authoring a book on Anselm with a non-historian – a metaphysician trained at Syracuse by Peter van Inwagen – and we're just short of finishing the final revisions in light of the comments of the series editor. So by this point I have a pretty thorough knowledge of what the scholarship on Anselm looks like, and in particular on the different approaches to the history of philosophy that one finds there. I want to use a selective tour through that scholarship as a way of building on my earlier points.

A good point of departure for this is a review essay by John Marenbon on two books

about Anselm by Katherin Rogers. I should begin by a kind of apology (and I believe I do mean that in its proper Greek sense) for spending a good deal of time examining in detail a very narrow sliver of the scholarly world – a single review essay. But (1) the historian is, above all, concerned with particulars, (2) I want to provide something very concrete to balance out the more general reflections of the first part of the paper, and (3) I believe that Marenbon’s criticisms of Rogers are instructive. So here goes.

As Marenbon understands the state of play, he represents the curatorial side of the history of philosophy and Rogers the argumentative side. Some of his criticisms of Rogers suggest that what bothers him is that Rogers is not especially good at the argumentative side; but it is hard to disentangle (even, sometimes, to distinguish) such criticisms from those that find fault with her for not instead being on the curatorial side. That is, Marenbon frequently seems to suggest that the problem with Rogers is that what she’s doing isn’t really the history of philosophy after all.

Let’s look first at some of Marenbon’s criticisms of Rogers. Marenbon writes:

Even a brief look shows that Rogers has little to offer historians who are looking for an accurate account of what Anselm and other medieval writers thought. . . . Rogers’s whole method is antipathetic to the aims of the historian. Ignoring the structure and aims of Anselm’s individual works and the context of debate in his time, and peremptorily rejecting the possibility that Anselm changed his philosophical views between works . . . she interrogates particular passages in order to uncover a metaphysical system she has already decided will be hidden there. . . . Of course an historian is entitled to choose a particular area of focus, which might well be determined by modern interests. But it remains the historian’s duty to show how this area fits into the wider pattern and objectives of the thinker who is being studied. Rogers, perhaps because she believes (against the textual evidence) that Anselm’s central concern was to expound the metaphysical system she claims to find, neglects this obligation.

I find three main criticisms in this passage. Let’s look at each of them in turn.

First, Marenbon objects that a historian has an obligation to show how her chosen area “fits into the wider pattern and objectives of the thinker who is being studied.” I want to ask: Always? Must a historian *always* do that? I just can’t bring myself to believe that every journal

article on a particular figure must display the subject under discussion in relation to the thinker's work as a whole – sometimes that's illuminating, when one is working on an unusually focused and systematic thinker, but often it's not.

More charitably, we might take it that Marenbon is articulating this demand only for book-length works on a particular figure. But then I have to reply, isn't that what Rogers thinks she's doing? She thinks that the metaphysical/epistemological system she lays out *is* the wider pattern of Anselm's work, that setting out that system *is* Anselm's principal objective, to which everything else is subservient. The only well-taken objection in the neighborhood, then, has to be that she has Anselm's system wrong, not that she fails by ignoring what's systematic.

Marenbon's second objection is that Rogers ignores the historical context of debate in Anselm's time. Let me simply stipulate that this is a bad thing to do. But does Marenbon make any effort at all to show even a single, slight misinterpretation that can be attributed to Rogers's failure? He does not. His review essay is quite long; he had plenty of space. So isn't this a clear case of what I called earlier the "reflexive complaint"?

Moreover, I need to know a good deal more about what Marenbon takes "the context of Anselm's day" to consist in before I can assess this objection. What evidence is there that Anselm was influenced in any way at all by other 11th-century thinkers? One would assume that he learned dialectic and theology from his teacher Lanfranc, but I have found reading Lanfranc to be of exactly zero utility for understanding Anselm. And again, if I'm to accept Marenbon's complaint about Rogers's ignoring the historical context of debate in Anselm's time, I need to be shown some way in which knowing Lanfranc, or Berengar of Tours, or Peter Damian, or some other 11th-century figure, would have delivered Rogers from the evil of some identifiable misinterpretation of Anselm.

Marenbon's third objection is that Rogers peremptorily rejects the possibility that Anselm changed his mind between works. But this just isn't true. Rogers doesn't reject that possibility out of hand. She reports her survey of the evidence (namely, a reading of all of Anselm's works) and finds that there is no evidence for such changes of mind. Granted, she doesn't offer extensive argument to show this, but then what exactly would such an argument

look like? It would require a book, and an exceptionally boring one. (She could call it *Anselm: The Same Damn Thing Over and Over*.) And I can certainly report my own view that she's right. With certain minor qualifications that have as much to do with mode of presentation as with Anselm's actual doctrine, I quite agree that Anselm is consistent in his thinking from his first work in the 1070s all the way to his final work in 1108.

So what exactly is Marenbon on about here? Does he have some reason for thinking that Anselm changed his mind about anything whatsoever over his thirty-plus years of writing? Or is it somehow part of the curatorial approach that we have to assume, and go looking for, developments in a thinker's views, that every philosopher must have an early, middle, and late period? Clearly not. But Rogers's denial of the relevance of a particular sort of historical argument one might make has so offended Marenbon's sensibilities that he couldn't resist taking a swipe at it, even though his own methodological position doesn't really support his criticism.

This is the point at which I should say that in one important respect I'm entirely on Marenbon's side here. He's right that Rogers's work isn't very good and that she frequently gets Anselm just plain wrong. My point is that much of his diagnosis of how Rogers goes wrong is mistaken, and it's mistaken because of his ideas about how the history of philosophy ought to be done: not because those ideas are wrong, so far as they bear upon the positive conduct of his own research (which is impressive), but because they include certain negative ideas about other people's methods that have blinded him to what's really going on. He takes himself to know that Rogers is a bad historian – not really a historian at all – that her Anselm isn't really Anselm at all, but Anselm-in-inverted-commas (*he actually says this!*). And – now we take the shortcut – he knows the sorts of things bad historians do, so he just ascribes those failings to her. The movement of thought here reminds me of a very distinguished philosopher under whom I once studied (you would all know the name, but I'm not going to tell you) who regularly took similar shortcuts in arguing against other philosophers. He would figure out that X's view was, say, a form of reliabilism, and then he'd be off and running with his handy pat refutation of reliabilism, which might well not interact in any interesting way with the

actual view he was supposedly discussing.

I think something very like that has happened here. Moreover, in my experience, this *sort* of thing is extremely common in cases in which historians of one type criticize historians of another type, at least in the history of medieval philosophy. Criticisms like those Marenbon levels against Rogers are a cheap way out of the more difficult work of showing that Rogers in some respect fails to get Anselm right. And this point brings me back to the overarching point of the first part of this paper. The chief end of the historian of philosophy is to *get the author right*. If Marenbon hasn't shown that Rogers has got Anselm wrong, he hasn't shown there's anything wrong with her history, period. The fact that her methods are not his is simply beside the point unless it can be shown that the failure of method has produced a failure of results. And Marenbon hasn't shown this. Contrast this, incidentally, with his philosophical arguments against Rogers, which are quite careful and good. He actually *shows* that her philosophical arguments fail to establish their conclusions. In those stretches of the review one would almost get the impression that Marenbon is my sort of historian – no doubt to his shame and horror.

But there's more. Marenbon takes an unfortunate turn when he considers some indications that a foolish reader of Rogers might take as evidence that Rogers is, after all, historically careful. Marenbon writes: "Some passages in the book may give the initial impression that, on the contrary, Rogers is an historically well-informed and conscientious writer." Not so, Marenbon cautions us: Rogers is in fact historically ignorant and careless. But most of his evidence for this judgment is downright bizarre. Consider this passage:

On occasion, Rogers makes comparisons between Anselm and other early medieval philosophers, such as Peter Damian. . . . Here too, the veneer of historical learning turns out to be superficial. She is familiar with neither the modern edition of Peter Damian's *De Divina Omnipotentia*, nor the modern literature on it.

Well good heavens. Rogers isn't familiar with the modern edition of Peter Damian's *De Divina Omnipotentia*! You know who else wasn't familiar with the modern edition of Peter Damian's *De Divina Omnipotentia*? Anselm. He probably didn't even know the work at all. Yes, of course historians ought to use the best available editions of the texts they're

investigating; please don't think I'm saying otherwise. But does Marenbon show that *for Rogers's purposes* anything untoward has happened because of her failure to use the modern edition of Damian? He does not. This complaint is sheer scholarly snottiness.

The snottiness leads Marenbon into outright error when he complains next about Rogers's conclusion that, according to Anselm, God necessarily creates the best possible world. Marenbon writes:

If any more proof of Rogers's anachronistic approach is needed, the reader should look at her treatment of the necessity of creation. . . . According to Rogers, Anselm believes that God cannot do otherwise than He does in fact do: given His perfection, the world which He makes must be the best world. She traces well the passages in Augustine which might have led Anselm to such a view. Indeed, although Rogers does not mention this, these sort of comments in Augustine, along with passages in Plato's *Timaeus*, certainly did lead a philosopher of the next generation, Abelard, to hold explicitly the view that God cannot do other than He does. On examination, however, the case of Abelard and his adherence to this view makes it extremely unlikely that Anselm subscribed to it. When Abelard proposed the view, he made it clear that he was putting forward a position with which almost no-one agreed. Yet he knew Anselm's work well, and if Anselm had provided a precedent, it is extraordinary that Abelard would not have mentioned it.

Marenbon here suggests a principle: "If Abelard can cite Anselm as precedent for a controversial view of his own, he does so." Even I, as little as I know about Abelard, can offer a counterexample to that principle. In his commentary on Romans, Abelard argued that the Atonement could not be understood as God's paying the devil a ransom to buy back human beings who were being justly held in captivity by the devil. Abelard's scorn for the ransom theory got him in trouble with Bernard of Clairvaux, who waged an energetic propaganda campaign against him on that ground and many others. Abelard was called to defend himself before councils and even the pope. And how many times, in all of that business, did Abelard bring up the fact that Anselm had offered quite similar arguments against the ransom theory in *Cur Deus Homo*? Not even once.

So what is there to be learned from this exchange? One lesson, I think, is that complaints about historiographical method can too easily substitute for the work of showing

how an interpretation goes wrong. But there's a huge difference between "She doesn't use the right edition of Damian" and "If only she had used the right edition of Damian she wouldn't have misunderstood Anselm as saying p when he was really saying q ." Perhaps, if this paper has any point at all, its point is that I just can't care about the first of those complaints unless I'm convinced of the merits of the second.

If Rogers's failure is not really one of method, though, what is it? It is, I think, one of the characteristic failures of historians of my own type. Rogers is interested in Anselm because she thinks he, better than anyone before or after him, sets forth a coherent and satisfying account of God and his relation to the created world. She is, as Marenbon rightly says, determined to find a metaphysical system in Anselm – for obviously a coherent and satisfying account of God and his relation to the created world requires a metaphysical system – and so she finds it. But there is no such metaphysical system in Anselm, as much as I'd like there to be. In particular, Anselm doesn't have any worked-out view of universals and properties and such. If I had time, or if this were a different sort of paper, I could take you through the various texts and show you exactly why Anselm doesn't, and probably can't, have a worked-out view of universals. And this is one reason that in our own work on Anselm my co-author and I have by and large refrained from relating Anselm to contemporary debates in the philosophy of religion – even though, like Rogers, we're interested in those debates and are inclined toward broadly Anselmian positions. Our series editor, for example, complained that we don't do anything to defend the doctrine of divine simplicity, which Anselm accepts, against its many contemporary critics. But we contend that Anselm does not have a sufficiently developed metaphysics to wrestle with the problems many contemporary philosophers have raised for the doctrine of divine simplicity that he accepts – problems that Anselm himself clearly does not see. Any defense of the doctrine that we could offer on Anselm's behalf might be Anselmian, but it would not be Anselm's.

Yet I would suggest, in closing, that there is a way of getting philosophical profit out of the historical enterprise without deforming the historiography or importing alien standards. I can only report what my co-author and I have found in working on Anselm. Like Rogers,

Sandra Visser and I are generally in sympathy with Anselm philosophically. We have found that working on Anselm – that is, working to get clear on what Anselm’s arguments and views actually are; working on him as an object of historical study – has actually made us better philosophers. And that’s because Anselm is a really good philosopher. His questions are not always our questions, and his answers are certainly not always our answers. But a fair bit of his philosophical and theological problematic remains alive, and because Anselm is so astute – so honest in facing philosophical difficulties and so inventive in meeting them – we do find that the work of getting clear on Anselm is, indirectly but unmistakably, an exercise in improving our own understanding of our somewhat different questions, and in sharpening our ability to answer them. Perhaps not all historians will look to the historical enterprise for such results. But my plea would be that such a philosophical payoff not be ruled out *a priori* as inimical to the historical task.