

Philosophy & Its Classical Past

Phillip Mitsis

Abstract: The notion that philosophers can abandon their history and set their arguments on new foundations has a long history. One strain of recent philosophy that traces its roots to Frege has been particularly confident in this regard, and its rejection of a classical past has had widespread influences on the study of ancient philosophy over the past several decades. With the waning of this recent paradigm, however, the possibility of philosophical engagement between the old and new has again led to significant work in several areas of philosophy. I concentrate on one of these, the philosophy of death, and also ask whether ancient philosophy might furnish models that enable contemporary philosophers to rise above their specialisms and address crucial issues in a public discourse, allowing for both mutual intelligibility and criticism.

If you want a future, darling, why don't you get a past?
– Cole Porter

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Back in the 1970s, there was a story in circulation about a newly minted ancient philosopher being introduced to an American philosopher of note, who asked what area of philosophy the younger man was interested in. When he replied “ancient philosophy,” the response he reputedly received was “Ancient philosophy. Really? You mean like Frege?”

I have heard so many versions of this story with so many different names attached to its protagonists that it is hard not to be skeptical about its veracity. Yet, like the opening confrontations of many a Platonic dialogue, this bit of probable fiction neatly encapsulates a set of deeper questions. I remember that I had readied my own cheeky retort to such barbs, just in case: “Oh God no, nothing so vulnerable to a few simple paradoxes as the *Grundgesetze*. I am interested in difficult and complex *PHIL-O-SO-PHERS* like Aristotle and Chrysippus,” throwing in the latter, instead of the more obvious Plato, because it was unlikely that any nonspecialist would know much about ancient Stoicism; and that would afford

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me the opportunity to toss around a few choice tidbits about the origins of propositional logic. But, of course, both the disingenuous put-down and my own overly defensive imaginary retort spoke to an anxiety then present in our field, as well as to a series of more long-standing questions about the relation of philosophy to its past.

At the time, our mythical supercilious philosopher, even if a little fuzzy on the precise historical details, hardly would have been alone in his conviction that Frege had set a distinctly new path for philosophy from which there was no looking back – a path, it is probably safe to infer, he would have thought wound through Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore before reaching an early peak in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and then continuing on to such august contemporaries as Quine, Sellars, and Dummett. However quaint this kind of story has come to look in retrospect, both as history and in its own right,¹ and however parochial, omitting so-called Continental philosophy and the eclectic nature of most American departments at the time, a general confidence about casting away the chains of history and approaching central philosophical questions in a way that was utterly contemporary was certainly in the air.

Of course, such insouciance toward the past was by no means entirely new in the history of philosophy, at least in the textbook accounts. A long tradition of teaching a small selection of particular texts (or passages) had gradually led to a corresponding view of Descartes as an earlier founder *de novo* of so-called modern philosophy: “modern” because of its methodological and metaphysical turn toward the inner self and the primacy it bestowed on epistemology. To be sure, none of Descartes's contemporaries would ever have thought that he had done something so revolutionary that it would relegate ancient philosophers to the dustbin of his-

tory, especially since most of them were themselves busy studying and reviving arguments from the ancient Epicureans, Stoics, and Skeptics.² So, too, it often goes unnoticed that in the *Discourse on the Method* (1637), Descartes himself characterizes his now famous autobiographical tale of solitary, original philosophical discovery as a “fable” that can act as a useful paradigm;³ a fable that was itself not only rather commonplace at the time, but that also had been current since at least the days of Galen.⁴ Moreover, the Cartesian turn toward epistemology still carried with it the baggage of a long and complicated philosophical prehistory, however dimly felt or understood, that included, at the very least, the rediscovery of the writings of an ancient Skeptic, Sextus Empiricus, and the influence of that great worshipper of antiquity, Montaigne, with his slogan of *Que sais-je?* (literally, “what do I know?”).

This time around, however, the threat to the continued relevance of historical philosophers posed by Frege appeared more clear-cut. Not only were many of the proponents of the new “analytic” philosophy more untouched by ancient paradigms than Descartes and his contemporaries, but they also were operating with a philosophical toolbox far more powerful and systematic than the few rather lacunose methodological procedures that Descartes had sketched out. New hard-hitting logical tools were being developed and applied to language in unprecedented ways. Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, on the other hand, had never undergone a corresponding “linguistic turn” of the sort that was now so profoundly transforming the nature of philosophical methods and arguments, nor did it ever develop something called “the philosophy of language” as a significant discipline in its own right. Nor, importantly, did philosophers in antiquity believe that an inquiry into language could serve as the exclusive point of entry into philosophical

problems – problems that could find their solutions only by reforming ordinary language or by using tools of logical analysis to clarify its structure. Thus, a radical parting of the ways between the old and new appeared unavoidable.

Not surprisingly, one consequence of these larger developments is that, over decades, it led to much handwringing in our field and professional camps were duly formed, some of them rather extreme. One influential group held that ancient philosophers should just crawl back into their scholarly shells, accept the reality that contemporary and ancient philosophy were indeed separate enterprises, and be content to approach Plato and Aristotle in much the same way one might an ancient medical text. We might all agree, for instance, that *On the Sacred Disease* is a text eminently worthy of historical study, but surely we would not go to Hippocrates for technical advice on how to treat a lymphoma of the spleen. Why then should anyone interested in mind and brain relations be expected to turn to, say, Plato's *Phaedo*?

At Oxford, by way of contrast, philosophy had never been a field of study separate from classics, and some prominent philosophers, like Gilbert Ryle, duly took note of earlier versions of current concerns that could be found in the ancients. Accordingly, despite the fact that the study of philosophy at Oxford, as it now proudly proclaims on its website, progressively freed itself institutionally from its "clerical and classical" roots, some scholars of ancient philosophy managed to continue Ryle's tack of isolating ancient arguments that adumbrated modern positions, thereby hoping to retain a voice, however muted, in current discussions. Here the argument was that if one looks carefully enough at, say, Aristotle's *De Anima*, one might just make out how he, too, was a functionalist in the philosophy of mind; indeed, per-

haps, the very first functionalist – well, kind of. Phillip Mitsis

Perhaps the most visible, articulate, and flattering position for the role of ancient philosophy, however, was staked out by Bernard Williams. This granted ancient philosophy the considerable advantage of being defended by someone who in his own right was among the most respected and influential of contemporary philosophers. Williams argued that philosophy not only is not like science, but that it is inescapably historical, and that practicing historical philosophy properly is very much an instance of doing philosophy, often of the best sort. The last thing that philosophy needs is to recruit more specialized white-coat wannabes unequipped to do real science, while losing touch with the rest of their discipline, and with their culture and history generally. So, for instance, in the face of what he took to be the boring and empty moral theorizing of the day, Williams went about mining deeply relevant philosophical views, even in figures like Homer. This is because, under the influence of Nietzsche, he found in the Greeks a repository of moral views that reflect the way we are likely to think about morality before falling prey to the mutual theoretical distortions of consequentialism and Kant. What was refreshingly new about old philosophers was their ability to take on real moral dilemmas and the kinds of fraught questions about friendship, love, death, and moral luck that had fallen out of contemporary moral theorizing. As he trenchantly put it, contemporary moral philosophy had found "an original way of being boring...by not discussing moral issues at all."⁵

Regrettably, however, there was one problem that upon his death Williams bequeathed to those wishing to do the history of philosophy philosophically, at least by his lights. Imagine that Mozart, after telling you how boring he finds the music

of von Dittersdorf and Mysliveček, hears some Bach and exclaims: “Now there is music from which a man can learn something.” He then sits down and pens what comes to be known as the Adagio and Fugue K. 546, and urges you to study the music of Bach because it can be a fruitful and inspirational source for your own compositions. Fine advice, perhaps, if you, too, are another composer like Mozart. Fine, too, in the case of ancient philosophy, if you are another philosopher of Williams’s caliber. At the moment, however, it still remains to be seen whether some future Bernard Williams will be able to take up the mantle of doing the kind of history of ancient philosophy that can be regarded by all, in the first instance, as old philosophy that is new.⁶

As we bide our time, what are some of the rest of us von Dittersdorfs doing? At a general level, the current study of ancient philosophy has moved beyond many of those earlier worries about being intellectually shelved with Hippocrates. Williams’s influence has played a role, but there also has been a gradual waning of the dominance of linguistic paradigms along with a growing movement toward the primacy of philosophy of mind and other philosophically productive notions of mental representation. Many of these are more hospitable to ancient arguments. For what it is worth, a recent poll conducted by Leiter Reports: A Philosophy Blog – the main blog for philosophers – charted attitudes toward various specialties. More than twelve hundred voters rated the history of philosophy as more central to the study of philosophy than the philosophy of language.⁷ Of course, the history of philosophy is rather broad, and it does not mean that all those voting were thinking of ancient philosophers. But in another Leiter poll ranking the most important philosophers of all time, Plato edged out Aristotle for the top spot, and even Socrates, who

wrote next to nothing, trounced Wittgenstein and Frege. So I think today’s young ancient philosophers, when introduced to a supercilious colleague, are in the enviable position of responding: “Frege? No, I am afraid I have to limit myself to top-five philosophers. Maybe someday if I have time to work my way down the list, I’ll give another look at my undergraduate notes on the historical influence of the *Begriffsschrift*.”

But on a more serious note, there does seem to be a growing sense, at least among younger colleagues, that they can get on with interesting work without having Frege looking over their shoulder, and that they do not necessarily have to formalize an argument to clarify it or to say something philosophically significant. Cynics may attribute these changes to a general sense that, as in literary studies, many have started to feel that they are losing their way. So perhaps one reason so many philosophers have given in to more laissez-faire attitudes is that the love affair with the linguistic turn is slowly going cold. That is, it is not so much that people no longer dismiss historical philosophers because they harbor hopes of discovering new creative philosophical possibilities, but only because a general disenchantment has given way to a certain wistful nostalgia and a longing, perhaps, for a time when individual philosophers were considered important, even beyond their professional blogs.

Or it might be that as each specialism becomes more entrenched and develops an increasingly technical and complex apparatus, the texts of the past offer a place where one can again think about some of the traditional central issues of philosophy in a more synthetic way. Ancient philosophers typically think in larger systems, and it may be, for example, that Aristotle is wrong to believe that he can explain everything in the world, even the soul, by means of his form/matter distinction. Yet, it is hard not to admire, even wistfully, his

intellectual courage and grandness of ambition in comparison with that of the colleague down the hall who says, “I just do metaphysics. I couldn’t possibly have anything to say about how that relates to the philosophy of mind.” In ancient texts one can again try to see the forest for the trees, especially since philosophical forests are not always on offer at the moment.

Whatever the truth of such suppositions, those studying ancient philosophy these days do seem, on the one hand, less self-consciously desperate for an interface with contemporary work, yet on the other, more likely to fall upon just such a connection, in part, perhaps, because the movement away from earlier more narrowly linguistic paradigms is again starting to blur the divide between ancient and contemporary methods and concerns. Rather than trying to catalog these many possibilities, however, it might be more useful to look at one salient case of a major creative engagement between the old and new in greater detail. In so doing, I will pass by important work that continues to be done in, among other areas, the philosophy of love and friendship,⁸ metaphysical essentialism and ancient modal logic,⁹ ancient cosmopolitanism,¹⁰ aesthetics,¹¹ and, of course, virtue ethics. The latter probably remains the most visible area, though there has been considerable pushback from scholars about how much the ancients actually subscribed to the doctrines about virtue and morality that they have been credited with originating.¹² I want to focus, rather, on the recent resurgence of contemporary philosophical work on death, since, by chance, it also affords the opportunity to raise a more general question about philosophers today and their audience.

The notion that old views of death are new may strike the lay ear as odd; what, after all, could be new about death? Yet, if one were to read what is often taken to be the

fundamental work of political and moral philosophy of the last century, John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971), and compare it to other central texts in the tradition from Thucydides to Hobbes, one striking feature would be how far the subject of death has dropped out of sight, along with the notion that trying to understand the nature of death and the fears it can generate is a fundamental requirement for any systematic ethical or political theory. Moral theorists – the sort that Williams characterized as empty and boring – typically discussed topics like rational deliberation and life plans, and the formation of social contracts in a way that gave scant notice to the fact that we are mortal and that our attitudes toward death may seep into many of our moral and political opinions and decisions. The entry on death in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967), for instance, summarized: “Most Anglo-American analytic philosophers probably regard the paucity of materials on death as evidence of the subject’s resistance to serious philosophical inquiry,” adding the caveat that the subject may be “more adequately dealt with by psychologists and social scientists.”¹³

Hobbes, on the other hand, thought that the fear of death was an important topic for philosophers because it is crucial in the formation of societies; unless agents feared death, it would be hard to see why they might give up their desire for power over others in exchange for what they want most of all: their self-preservation. Thucydides had a more grim view about the possibilities of civil society: he thought that by falling into factions, individuals would willingly sacrifice not only their interests, but even their lives on account of shared hatred, desire for revenge, or partisan political goals. But, in any case, generations of philosophers had thought it important to address this particular disagreement as part of “serious philosophical inquiry.”

Anyone who reads ancient philosophical texts, and those influenced by them (like Hobbes), can hardly fail to be struck not only by the way that questions about death are central components of ancient philosophical discussions, but also by the fact that almost all those philosophers (except, with some qualifications, Aristotle) think that death is not an evil and that it should not be feared, since it cannot harm a good person. Many contemporary philosophers who have become interested in the topic disagree, and this disagreement has sparked a fruitful debate between the old and new.

Indeed, the philosophy of death has recently become an important new area of analysis that cuts across many subdisciplines of philosophy, implicated in a host of questions about personal identity, the nature of time, and the wrongness of killing (including capital punishment, abortion, killing animals for food, and warfare). The extent and sophistication of these arguments about the nature of death and whether it harms us is reflected in a slew of new positions owning precise but forbidding names: *actualist comparativism*, *eternalism*, *subsequentism*, *concurrentism*, and *priorism*, to list a few. In an important sense, these positions have all been developed in an attempt to address a few deceptively simple arguments formulated by the ancient Epicureans, with some defending Epicurus, and others thinking him wrong (although disagreeing about how exactly he is wrong). But it is no exaggeration to say that it was by engaging with these Epicurean arguments that an important new area of contemporary philosophy has taken root, giving rise to classes, graduate seminars, and a steady stream of publications.¹⁴

What are some of these arguments and why have they been so generative? Epicurus begins with the assumption that upon our death we will be annihilated. That

being the case, it is a mistake to think, he insists, that we can be harmed by death. When we are dead we cannot be harmed, since we do not exist. When we are alive, death does not harm us, since we are alive. If one thinks that our death causes us harm, the philosophical challenge is to answer the basic kinds of questions one can ask about any harm: Who was harmed? When did the harm occur? Of what did the harm consist? This turns out to be extremely difficult. One initially might think, for instance, that I am the one harmed by my death. But if I do not exist after my death, how can I be harmed? If I persist in thinking, however, that I am harmed by my death, it may be because I believe that I somehow will be deprived of something when I am dead. But how can something that does not exist suffer deprivation? And how could a deprivation in the future, even if we were to concede that death is a future deprivation, harm me now without appealing to an unhelpful notion of backward causation?

In a paper that has become a touchstone for subsequent work, Thomas Nagel wrangled with these Epicurean arguments in order to defend his claim that if there were “no limit to the amount of life that it would be good to have, it may be that a bad end is in store for all of us.”¹⁵ On the other hand, Bernard Williams defended an opposing Epicurean argument: Lucretius’s belief that we should be horrified by the idea of immortality as defined by traditional religion, Plato, and others.¹⁶ To Lucretius, immortality would be unbearably tedious. Sure, one might be able to stay fresh for the first several million years of teaching intro logic, for instance, but eternity is a very long time; it might start to get a little stale. Also, our personal identity tends to change a bit over time. I am different from what I was in my junior high days (perhaps not different enough for my wife); but after billions of years, is it plausible to think I will remain recogniz-

ably myself, and if not, does it then make sense to talk about my immortality?

David Hume found consoling, though Nabokov found terrifying, another argument from the Epicurean arsenal: the so-called symmetry argument. We normally do not spend much time fretting about our pre-vital existence before we were conceived. This is because, we did not yet exist. If our future death is a relevantly similar state of nothingness, why then should we worry about death any more than we worry about our pre-vital nonexistence? Nabokov, however, in *Speak, Memory* (1951) describes a young chronophobe looking at family movies before his birth and experiencing panic at the thought that life had been going on earlier without him. He is terrified at seeing in these movies a brand new baby carriage, “with the smug, encroaching air of a coffin,” empty on the porch, awaiting his birth as if “in the reverse course of events, his very bones had disintegrated.” Again, different intuitions can be explained and defended here – Nabokov’s chronophobe might not have straight all his thoughts about the metaphysical grounds of his identity – but again our conclusions here will depend on a host of intertwining views about personal identity, and our attitudes toward past and future experiences (and nonexperiences, like death). To be sure, these Epicurean arguments are extractable from their ancient context as a set of difficult individual puzzles. But those who, in the spirit of Williams, are paying closer attention to their original context are starting to discover a set of wider implications for our conceptions of death and the ancient claim that philosophy is a form of thanatology.

The detailed work surrounding these questions can be fascinating and deeply stimulating to academics and students alike. Yet, how many people, even among the readers of this journal, are likely to be aware of any

of it? Very few, I imagine. Many more instead will have come across literary critic Stephen Greenblatt’s recent Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller about Lucretius: *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*.¹⁷ Indeed, many of us obscurely laboring away on Lucretius for the past several decades suddenly became noticed with a new respect by our comparative literature colleagues, and for that puffing up of our chests we owe a debt of thanks.

Greenblatt’s book is a gripping historical thriller populated by brave new intellectuals who – inspired by the rediscovery and transmission of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* during the Italian Renaissance – try to save the world from pleasure-hating monks by means of a heady and modern mixture of materialism, sex, and quantum mechanics. It is undoubtedly a narrative tour de force. Of course, one does not have to be Bruno Latour to be vaguely suspicious of a tale in which our modernity depended on a single idea in a single text, especially since anyone familiar with the history of Epicureanism knows that there were many other avenues of transmission for these ideas, and that even confident Epicureans, like Pierre Gassendi, rejected the swerve as nonsensical. So, as much as I wish it were true, I am afraid I remain unpersuaded that the swerve made the world “modern,” whatever that means.

But my purpose here is not to be polemical. I want to conclude with a question that Greenblatt’s book and its provocative title raise about the relation of philosophy to its audience, old and new. Gideon Rosen, a philosopher at Princeton, has recently made the claim that, despite all the current soul searching about the humanities, things are actually just fine. The problem is that humanists naturally have a tough time reaching a wider public because the ideas they deal with are too complicated to be encapsulated in the sort of bullet points and simple narratives that the

lay person comfortably digests. For Rosen, the problem is essentially one of bad press coupled with an intellectually inert public. If their lids get heavy when faced with detailed arguments about actualist comparativism, and if they prefer a memorable but misleading catchphrase about the swerve making us modern, that is their fault and not ours.

I wonder, however, if the problem really only goes in one direction. Especially with respect to today's philosophers, I wonder whether, as they fall further into jargon-filled specialisms, they not only are forfeiting an ability to communicate their ideas to the public, to colleagues in other departments, and even to their own colleagues, but also are risking the loss of something essential to philosophy itself. John Venn, the greatest English logician before Russell, makes this point in *The Logic of Chance* (1866), a book that philosophers should read not solely, as now happens occasionally, for its importance in the history of the frequency interpretation of probability, but even more for its exemplary clarity and directness of expression, its desire to engage others, and its genuinely philosophical spirit: "No science can safely be abandoned entirely to its own devotees. Its details of course can only be studied by those who make it their special occupation, but its general principles are sure to be cramped if it is not exposed occasionally to the free criticism of those whose main

culture has been of a more general character."¹⁸ Venn, who won a Latin declamation prize at Caius College, confided in his diary that he wished that he had learned to speak with the clarity of his models. His great model, of course, was Cicero, as he had been for Locke, Hume, and generations of philosophers until, as proudly proclaimed in today's Oxford, they were able to free themselves from their classical roots.

In a way perhaps not untimely, there has been a recent resurgence of interest (among those working in ancient philosophy) in Roman philosophers, especially Cicero and Seneca. Scholars are trying to understand how Roman philosophers managed to fashion a public discourse that was not only far from being "cramped" in Venn's sense, but that was also able to address the most pressing challenges of the day, all the while armed with philosophy's most technical arguments.¹⁹ As we face our own greatest challenges – the environment, questions of equality and justice, our relations to animals, gender – we can perhaps hold on to the hope that ancient philosophers will not only continue to be of use in presenting us with issues that are not empty and boring, but also that the philosophers of old might again teach today's tongue-tied philosophers to begin to find a voice that can speak to and, in turn, be criticized by "those whose main culture has been of a more general character."

ENDNOTES

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¹ See Carl E. Schorske, "The New Rigorism in the Human Sciences, 1940 – 1960," *Dædalus* 126 (1) (Winter 1997): 289 – 310.

² The best account of the Hellenistic philosophers remains A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics* (New York; London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. and Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974).

- ³ Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds., *Oeuvres de Descartes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Leopold Cerf, 1897; reprinted Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1996), 4. *Phillip Mitsis*
- ⁴ See Stephen Menn, “The *Discourse on the Method* and the Tradition of Intellectual Autobiography,” in *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Jon Miller and Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- ⁵ Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 9.
- ⁶ See Bernard Williams, *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- ⁷ Brian Leiter, Leiter Reports: A Philosophy Blog, <http://leiterreports.typepad.com>.
- ⁸ David Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- ⁹ Marko Malink, *Aristotle’s Modal Syllogistic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- ¹⁰ A. A. Long, “The Concept of the Cosmopolitan in Ancient Greek and Roman Thought, *Dædalus* 137 (3) (Summer 2008): 50–58.
- ¹¹ David Konstan, *Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- ¹² Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011); and for important pushback and the best recent book on Plato, see Iakovos Vasiliou, *Aiming at Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- ¹³ Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).
- ¹⁴ For a good overview, see Ben Bradley, Fred Feldman, and Jens Johansson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- ¹⁵ Thomas Nagel, “Death,” *Nôus* 4 (1) (1970): 73–80.
- ¹⁶ Bernard Williams, “The Makropoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
- ¹⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).
- ¹⁸ John Venn, *The Logic of Chance* (London; Cambridge: Macmillan, 1866), ix.
- ¹⁹ In addition to the many works of Martha Nussbaum, see more particularly Brad Inwood, *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Joy Connolly, *The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).