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## Getting Things Right in the History of Philosophy

I begin where Rudolf Carnap ends in his seminal article, “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology”: “*Let us be cautious in making assertions and critical in examining them, but tolerant in permitting linguistic forms*” (Carnap 1950. 40). In his earlier *Logical Syntax of Language*, Carnap labeled this – for understandable reasons – the “Principle of Tolerance” (Carnap 1937. 52). Carnap is concerned primarily with tolerance of alternative formal languages for use in formulating and evaluating claims in the empirical sciences.<sup>1</sup> However, one could entertain the possibility that a counterpart of this principle applies to the study of the history of philosophy. On a first approximation, such a principle would be: *Let us be cautious in making assertions about historical texts and critical in examining them, but tolerant in permitting interpretive forms*. Here we have a Carnapian sort of tolerance for the use of alternative interpretive perspectives in formulating and evaluating claims in historical texts. Moreover, just as Carnap holds that linguistic forms are judged by “their success or failure in practical use” (Carnap 1950. 40), the same, it seems, could be said of the different forms of interpretation employed in the history of philosophy.

In this brief set of remarks, I explore methodological issues relating to the goal of tolerance in the study of the history of philosophy. My investigation focuses in particular on a principle that Christia Mercer has recently proposed as critical for current work in the history of philosophy, namely, the “Getting Things Right Constraint” (hereafter, GTRC). Mercer promotes this principle in the context of reflecting on a 2015 exchange in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* between Daniel Garber and Michael Della Rocca over the proper methodology for the interpretation of Spinoza. In what follows, I critically examine a narrative that Mercer offers in response to this exchange, according to which

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Eric Schliesser, Jon Shaheen, Oliver Toth and Judit Szalai for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

On Carnap’s principle of tolerance, see Ricketts 2008. As Ricketts himself notes, Carnap’s “Principle of Tolerance” is not so much a principle governing truth and falsity as a pragmatic attitude toward the adoption of a particular formalism as the language of science (218).

there has been a recent “revolution” in the history of philosophy that involves the victory of a “contextualism” defined in terms of the GTRC over a previously dominant “appropriationism”, which rejected such a constraint. Then I provide some reasons to think that her insistence on the GTRC as a central constraint on philosophical inquiry into historical texts unacceptably compromises tolerance in the history of philosophy.

Before considering Mercer’s GTRC further, however, it will be helpful to have before us some basic points from the exchange that provides the occasion for her emphasis on the centrality of this constraint. The exchange begins with Garber’s claim that Della Rocca’s work on Spinoza presents this figure as a Rationalist “superhero”, sworn defender of an uncompromising version of the PSR (Principle of Sufficient Reason) (Garber 2015. 506–7). As an alternative to this kind of “rational reconstruction”, Garber offers an approach that focuses on the views of the historical Spinoza, with all their difficulties, ambiguities, and inconsistencies. To be sure, Garber expresses tolerance when he insists that “I by no means dismiss Della Rocca’s project,” noting that “rational reconstruction has a long and noble history” (Garber 2015. 519). However, his suggestion is that if the goal is to capture the real Spinoza, Della Rocca’s approach does not seem to be particularly promising.<sup>2</sup>

In response, Della Rocca insists that his PSR-driven reading of Spinoza “is firmly anchored in Spinoza’s texts,” and thus is intended to capture the real Spinoza (Della Rocca 2015. 529). According to Della Rocca, his disagreement with Garber is primarily not a second-order methodological one concerning the goals of the history of philosophy, but rather a first-order dispute over whether his more “holistic” understanding of Spinoza is textually adequate. As in the case of Garber, however, Della Rocca embraces a form of tolerance, noting that “there is no reason in advance” for thinking that either his or Garber’s approach is “more likely to lead us to the real, historical Spinoza” (Della Rocca 2015. 533). The proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the eating.<sup>3</sup>

In her consideration on this exchange, Mercer in effect agrees with Della Rocca that Garber’s suggestion of a fundamental methodological divide between Della Rocca’s rational reconstructionist and Garber’s “contextualist” approaches to the history of philosophy is misconceived. Mercer’s emphasis is on the crucial methodological agreement between the two that derives from their common acceptance of the aforementioned GTRC. As Mercer expresses it, the GTRC holds that “historians of philosophy should not attribute claims or ideas

<sup>2</sup> However, I take Garber’s tolerance for Della Rocca’s purported rational reconstructionism to depend on the assumption that this goal is only one of different possible goals the interpreter of Spinoza could have.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, I am inclined to think that Garber’s approach is more successful than Della Rocca’s at leading us to the real, historical Spinoza. However, my focus here is on the methodological issues Garber raises rather than on the relative fidelity of his interpretation of Spinoza.

to historical figures without concern for whether or not they are ones the figures would recognize as their own.” Those who reject the GTRC “approach writings without intending to articulate the authentic views of the historical figure”, and for this reason alone they cannot be considered even to be doing work in the history of philosophy. Nevertheless, an insistence that allegiance to this constraint is essential for work in the history of philosophy does not constitute unacceptable intolerance insofar as the constraint itself allows for “very different means to the goal of getting things right” (Mercer 2019. 530). In fact, Mercer takes the dispute between Garber and Della Rocca to illustrate just this point since their differences notwithstanding, they both adhere to the GTRC.

According to Mercer, the methodological divide that Garber uses to distinguish himself from Della Rocca is in fact a thing of the past. She claims that during the 1970s and ‘80s, contextualist upstarts rebelled against defenders of the reigning method in analytic history of philosophy, namely, “appropriationism”, which prioritized relevance to contemporary philosophy over historical accuracy. As examples of the appropriationist line, she cites Jonathan Bennett’s 1971 *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* and Bernard Williams’ 1978 *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry* (Mercer 2019. 533–34). As she sees it, however, there was over the next few decades a “silent contextualist revolution” that gradually replaced appropriationism with an alternative for which the GTRC is central. Mercer takes the ultimate victory of this alternative to be indicated by writings from Bennett in 2001 and from Williams in 2006 in which they acknowledge the need for historians of philosophy to attend to the actual views of the figures they study (Mercer 2019. 535–36).

One can question whether the old appropriationist/contextualist distinction was quite as sharp as – or sharp in quite the way in which – Mercer indicates. For instance, there seems to be a clear contrast between the approach of Bennett and Williams, on the one hand, and the approach that Lisa Downing has reported was occasionally employed at Princeton during the 1980s, on the other.<sup>4</sup> As Downing recalls, her teachers sometimes attached “asterisks (pronounced as ‘stars’) to the names of the great, dead philosophers, to allow one to speak of their views without being responsible for historical accuracy about them” (Downing 2004. 21). Thus, instead of debating the views of the real Locke on the nature of color, for instance, one could stipulate that Locke\* was some sort of dispositionalist about color in order to consider the philosophical merits of such a position. I am sympathetic to Downing’s own conclusion that this practice is problematic insofar as “one might wonder why Locke is being invoked at all: what is being added to the dispositionalist view by associating it with Locke through the medium of the fictional Locke\*?” (Downing 2004. 21). But my

<sup>4</sup> Mercer (2019. 534n18) cites the approach Downing mentions but suggests that is similar to the approach of Bennett and Williams.

point is that whatever Bennett and Williams were doing during the 1970s and '80s, they were not engaging in the sort of practice Downing describes. They may well be criticized for getting the views of the historical figures wrong due to a failure to engage seriously with the historical context of these views. However, it doesn't seem fair to charge Bennett and Williams with not caring at all whether such views correspond in any way to what these figures actually held.

The crucial question at issue with respect to the older "analytic" approach to the history of philosophy, it seems to me, is whether one can recapture what is taken to be philosophically important in historical texts without considering (much) the controversies in which the authors of those texts engaged and the broader historical context in which they wrote.<sup>5</sup> I read the circa-2000 passages from Bennett and Williams that Mercer cites as involving some recognition of the plausibility of a negative answer to this question, as opposed to a newfound attraction to the GTRC. If this is correct, then the change brought on by the silent contextualist revolution was less centered on the GTRC than Mercer's narrative suggests.

Moreover, one can question whether Mercer is correct in thinking that recent developments have made the GTRC constitutive of inquiry in the history of philosophy. It is a sign of trouble, I think, that Mercer's GTRC bears a striking resemblance to the (in)famous methodological principle of Quentin Skinner that "No agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he has meant or done" (Skinner 1969. 28). As Mercer herself acknowledges, this principle has been subject to considerable criticism.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, she also notes that she has "tried to render my GTRC so that it responds to the main complaints leveled against Skinner's version" (Mercer 2019. 535n21). Nevertheless, her GTRC seems to retain a controversial core feature of Skinner's methodological principle insofar as it insists on a guiding "concern" for whether or not certain claims or ideas "are ones the figures would recognize as their own" (Mercer 2019. 530).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> It might be suggested that the consideration of the controversies in which the authors of historical texts engaged and the broader historical context in which they wrote is a general requirement for work in the history of philosophy; see note 18.

<sup>6</sup> Mercer 2019. 535n21 cites the critical discussion of Skinner's principle in Lærke 2013. As indicated in Schliesser 2019, the main objection is that this principle cannot be salvaged because "it relies on (unrecoverable) counterfactuals that cannot be grounded in the historical record." I think this line of objection can be related to the objections I raise to Mercer's GTRC, but I will need to leave discussion of this point for (perhaps) another time.

<sup>7</sup> In a comment on Eric Schliesser's blog post on her article, Mercer notes that though she does "give a shout out to Skinner," she nonetheless is distinguished from him in "not being interested in intentions. I purposively avoid using the term" (Schliesser 2019). To be sure, the concern to show that historical authors could recognize certain formulations as their own views is distinguishable from the concern to show that these authors intended to articulate the claims so formulated when offering these views. Nevertheless, the problems that I will indicate for the former concern seem to me to apply equally to the latter concern.

The primacy of such a concern would seem to render disreputable any interpretation in the history of philosophy that strays from the ways in which historical authors conceived – or would/could have conceived – of their own views.

We can turn again to Della Rocca to illustrate the difficulties here. What is at issue once more is Della Rocca's interpretation of Spinoza, though not in his 2008 *Spinoza*, on which Garber focuses, but rather in his 1996 book, *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*. In his insightful discussion of the latter work, Allen Wood draws attention to Della Rocca's attempt to overcome interpretive difficulties by appealing to twentieth-century notions not available to the historical Spinoza (Wood 2001. 283–87).<sup>8</sup> In particular, the attempt is to reconcile the following three claims in Spinoza's *Ethics* that seem to be inconsistent:<sup>9</sup>

1. Every mode of extension is caused by another mode of extension (cf. Spinoza, *Ethics* 2p7).<sup>10</sup>
2. "The mind and the body are one and the same thing, conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension" (cf. *Ethics* 3p2s).<sup>11</sup>
3. No mode of substance conceived under the attribute of thought can cause any mode of substance conceived under the attribute of extension, or vice versa (cf. *Ethics* 3p2).

There is the argument that Spinoza is committed to the conclusion that (3) is inconsistent with (1) and (2).<sup>12</sup> For if mode of extension *A* causes mode of extension *B*, and if *A* is identical to mode of thought *I*, then, it would seem, *I* causes *B*, contrary to (3).

In order to establish the consistency of Spinoza's three claims, Della Rocca draws on W. V. O. Quine's notion of the referential opacity of intensional contexts (Quine 1971). According to Della Rocca's interpretation, the view that Spinoza is expressing is best explained in terms of the fact that causal contexts are intensional, and therefore referentially opaque. That is to say, what is true of causes and

<sup>8</sup> Wood is considering the discussion in Della Rocca 1996. 118–40.

<sup>9</sup> I am drawing on the summary presented in Wood 2001. 284, though I switch (2) and (3) in this summary. I indicate the need for further alterations in note 10.

<sup>10</sup> Given Spinoza's admission in *Ethics* 1p21 that there are certain "infinite modes" that arise not from other modes but immediately from the "absolute nature" of a divine attribute, the claim needs to be recast as follows: Every *finite* mode of extension is caused by another *finite* mode of extension. Further, the more appropriate text for this claim would seem to be *Ethics* 1p28.

<sup>11</sup> This can be rendered as the claim that every mode of thought is identical to some mode of extension, and vice versa.

<sup>12</sup> The argument for this claim that Della Rocca considers is found in Delahunty 1985. 197; cf. Della Rocca 1996. 121–22.

effects depends not only on their identities but also on how they are conceived. In this way, causal contexts are akin to belief contexts insofar as extensionally equivalent expressions are not substitutable in such contexts *salvo veritate*.<sup>13</sup> Thus, there is a way of blocking the inference in Spinoza from the identity of modes of extension (thought) with modes of thought (extension) to the conclusion that modes of thought (extension) can cause modes of extension (thought).

Now whether one thinks this solution works or not, the question is whether the historian of philosophy can invoke an interpretation of Spinoza that relies on concepts that were not present in the seventeenth century (at least in their specific Quinean form). The question is consequential, for as Wood notes, “if it is even *possible* that Della Rocca’s interpretation is correct, then it must be possible that what Spinoza *means* in the *Ethics* can be properly understood only in terms of concepts not available to Spinoza” (Wood 2001. 286). And with this possibility comes the possibility that there are correct formulations of positions in Spinoza’s text that he could not have recognized as his own. In taking such a possibility seriously, we would seem to be violating Mercer’s GTRC, as much as Skinner’s principle. Yet to rule out interpretations such as Della Rocca’s *a priori*, by appeal to such principles, appears to be an intolerable form of intolerance.

In response, one might insist that it is simply a contextualist commonplace that nothing other than the understanding of the historical authors themselves can be used to recapture their own views. However, a passage from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* indicates that this purported commonplace is problematic. In this passage, Kant claims:

[W]hen we compare the thoughts that an author expresses about a subject, in ordinary speech as well as in writings, it is not at all unusual to find that we understand him better than he understood himself, since he may not have determined his concept sufficiently and hence sometimes spoke, or even thought, contrary to his own intention (Kant 1997. A314/B370).<sup>14</sup>

Of course, the interpreter would be well advised to be (borrowing again from Carnap) cautious and critically reflective before claiming that she understands the historical author better than the author in fact understands – and perhaps even could understand – himself. There is much (contextual) work that needs

<sup>13</sup> For instance, from the fact that Ralph believes that the man at the beach is Orcutt, as well as the fact that Orcutt is a spy, it cannot follow that Ralph believes that the man at the beach is a spy (I borrow the example from Quine 1971. 106). Quine famously argues that since claims involving propositional attitudes such as beliefs are referentially opaque in this way, and since this opacity renders such claims problematic in ways that referentially transparent claims are not, it is best to leave out any reference to such attitudes in the language of science. Since causal claims are clearly part of physics, for Spinoza, this same argument cannot apply to his view.

<sup>14</sup> I owe my knowledge of this passage to the citation of it in Wood 2001. 293.

to be done in order to show that a certain determination of a concept to which the author did not have, or even could not have had, access advances the understanding of the problem or issue that the text of that author introduces. However, it would seem to be overly dogmatic simply to invoke something like the GTRC as a reason for dismissing any such line of inquiry at the start. Perhaps the case can be made, perhaps not; better to let the interpreter try, and then judge by the results.

Indeed, certain contextualist projects would seem to require an understanding of a particular historical view in terms inaccessible to its author. For instance, Wood notes the project of considering whether an historical author “belongs to a certain tradition of thinking that was subsequent to him and was based on certain ways of appropriating his thought” (Wood 2001. 287). Since later traditions typically introduce “determinations of concepts” (to borrow from Kant) that go beyond what was accessible to the author, it is questionable that this sort of project could satisfy the concern to show that the author in question could recognize connections they did not have the resources to conceive as something that derive from their own view. Should the historian of philosophy prohibit such projects simply on the basis of the fact that this sort of concern is paramount in the GTRC? It appears to be implausible that she should.<sup>15</sup>

In closing, I would like to consider (again, briefly) a more radical objection to the GTRC that targets its assumption that there is some *thing* in the historical texts, independent of the various interpretations of these texts, that the interpretations do or do not get right (or get more or less right). My concern here is not to dispute the assumption itself; indeed, I have considerable sympathy for it. Rather, I want to explore whether the acceptance of such an assumption is a necessary condition for (legitimate) inquiry in the history of philosophy. Here we can entertain the possibility of a counterpart in the history of philosophy to the view of ontology in the article from Carnap I cited at the outset. In this article, Carnap claims that questions in ontology, such as whether there are abstract entities, can be answered only from within a particular logico-linguistic framework. The question of whether this framework itself is adequate can be only the “external” question of whether we have sufficient pragmatic grounds for adopting it rather than other frameworks (Carnap 1950. 31–32).<sup>16</sup> Similarly, one can imagine a position on which questions concerning what a text says are always

<sup>15</sup> Such contextualist projects are warranted by Mogen Lærke’s “historical perspectivism”, according to which “the true historical meaning of a past historical text should be defined as *the sum of actually historically immanent or contextually internal perspectives on [the] past philosophical text*” (Lærke 2013. 23). I am not certain, however, that Lærke’s historical perspectivism permits the sort of approach to Spinoza in Della Rocca for which Wood is concerned to make room.

<sup>16</sup> The “pragmatic grounds” that Carnap emphasizes include “the efficiency, fruitfulness and simplicity” of the linguistic framework (Carnap 1950. 23).

internal to a particular interpretation of that text. The question of whether that interpretation itself is adequate is just the external question of whether it serves our purposes to adopt it rather than other interpretations. The author's own interpretation has no special priority here and is to be assessed with competing interpretations on the same pragmatic grounds.<sup>17</sup> Insofar as such a position challenges a presupposition of the GTRC, it seems on Mercer's view that it cannot be seriously entertained within the history of philosophy given the success of the contextualist revolution. However, the sort of meta-philosophical issues that Carnap's views on ontology raise certainly are fair game in discussions in metaphysics, and indeed reflection on such views can enrich these discussions. I do not see why something similar could not be possible for the counterpart to Carnap's views in the history of philosophy. But if something similar is possible, it would behoove historians of philosophy to seek out regulative principles of inquiry that are more permissive than the GTRC.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted, however, that insofar as the counterpart of Carnap's Principle of Tolerance requires such a position, it would hardly be appropriate as a general regulative principle in the history of philosophy.

<sup>18</sup> Which principles could those be, you might well ask? Good question! (To be continued.)



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