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Does Philosophy Need to Know Its History?

Sally Sedgwick[1]

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Abstract
The thesis defended in this paper is that philosophy's knowledge of its history is not merely illuminating or educational but *indispensable* for its progress and pursuit of truth. It is argued, first, that philosophy can only sufficiently appreciate the meaning and significance of its present concepts and problems if it has at its disposal tools for critical evaluation, including tools that only a knowledge of its history can supply. Philosophy's past, in other words, contains crucial clues to its present self-understanding and practice. Second, philosophy must know its history if it is to dispense with a certain illusion about itself. This is the illusion that truly original ideas *have* no history but are instead generated ex nihilo from the thinker who has successfully left her past behind. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of two philosophers who very much appreciated these reasons for why philosophy needs to know its history: Nietzsche and Hegel.

Keywords Philosophy · History of philosophy · Bertrand Russell · G.W.F Hegel · Friedrich Nietzsche · George Santayana · Immanuel Kant · David Hume · Plato · John Rawls · Idealism · Realism

Why should philosophy need to know its history? For what purpose or end? George Santayana suggests an answer: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."[1] Santayana's message is that history contains valuable lessons, lessons we can ill afford to ignore. If he is right, then philosophy needs to know its history, too. At least, it needs this kind of knowledge if it is to move forward or progress.

Is philosophy even *capable* of progress? The question hardly seems worth raising in the case of other areas of inquiry such as physics and medicine. These sciences have obviously progressed; moreover, their advances have depended upon attending to their past and correcting old mistakes. If philosophy does not appear to progress, this may be because its central questions — "What is truth/knowledge/beauty/justice?" — are so fundamental and abstract. We call them "perennial" for a reason.

It is common to suppose that *persons* are capable of moral, psychological, and intellectual progress. Judgments of improvement are of course comparative; we compare a present self with its former instantiations. We say: "She is now a cleverer or kinder person than she used to be. She has altered her old ways; she has broken bad habits and matured. She no longer sees her life through the same self-defeating lens." *Entire peoples*, too, would seem able to extract lessons from their past upon which build a brighter future. The US Civil War gave way to the Reconstruction era; Germany transformed itself into a social democracy following the defeat of the Third Reich; South Africa repealed its legislated apartheid and held multiracial elections a few years later.

As these examples suggest, lessons of the past become especially pressing in the wake of a breakdown of some kind. The past is consulted not for its intrinsic interest but as a source of instruction. An individual finds that he is unable to free himself from self-destructive patterns; a nation is torn apart by conflict or war and must try to rebuild. If the above (admittedly cherry-picked) examples are representative of general trends, they would seem to warrant the conclusion that individuals as well as entire peoples can learn from their mistakes and misdeeds. Perhaps the Abolitionist Theodore Parker was right, then, to reassure us that the "arc of the moral universe ... bends toward justice." Although that arc is frequently interrupted by periods of backsliding or regress, overall the trajectory

[1] *The Life of Reason* (1905-06), vol. 1.

✉ Sally Sedgwick
ssedgw@bu.edu

[1] Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

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seems to point in a positive direction. It is at least not obviously absurd to suggest, with Immanuel Kant, that humanity is progressing toward the realization of a "universal civil society."[2]

It is one thing, however, to agree with Santayana that we should learn from the lessons of the past, and quite another to be persuaded by the thesis that a knowledge of history is *necessary* for progress, whether in the case of individuals or of nations. As for philosophy, we would need to show that, if it ignores its history, it deprives itself of the chance of advancement of a certain kind. We would need an argument establishing that philosophy's knowledge of its past affords it a *unique* kind of instruction, instruction that cannot be supplied by other means.

On its face, this latter thesis seems dubious. Returning to our example of personal progress, we are advised by some spiritual gurus that if we are to set ourselves on the path to authenticity or enlightenment, our best course of action is to *give up* or *detach from* our past. They tell us that if we wish to discover our "true" self or perhaps forge a new identity, we need to make a fresh start. The recommendation isn't wholly unconvincing, for surely there are cases in which a person's personal history is more a burden or hindrance than anything else. If my past is dragging me down — if I am unable to learn from it and move beyond it — then I might indeed best try forget it. Even if my past is a source of pride, I will hardly move forward if I do nothing other than rest on my laurels. We don't expect progress to occur in the fields of physics or chemistry if their gaze remains fixed on their heroes and achievements of yore. Why should it be any more reasonable to expect a person to mature if she is obsessed with her history, whether out of pride or nostalgia? Why should we furthermore suppose that personal re-invention or growth is likely to occur if we use the past as a place to hide? For at least these reasons, there may be wisdom in the idea that forgetting or detaching from the past can have a growth-inducing and liberating value.

If we pursue this line of argument, we might then be persuaded that it contains a lesson for philosophy as well, and that philosophy, too, stands to benefit from forgetting or ignoring its past. The thesis I am going to defend in this essay is very different. I will argue that philosophy *requires* an awareness of its history. Knowledge of its history is not just valuable but *indispensable* for its progress and pursuit of truth.

I

Those who urge that philosophy requires knowledge of its history for purposes of instruction presuppose either that (i) philosophy's past is not just a series of mistakes or that (ii) even if it is, the mistakes are illuminating somehow. The assumption that philosophy's past consists of nothing but mistakes is hard to swallow. After all, we still enlist some of its old methods and adhere to some of its old doctrines. Where would the practice of philosophy today be, for instance, did it not still rely on something resembling the Socratic method as portrayed in Plato's *Dialogues*? We continue to discover in those *Dialogues* important lessons about the nature of philosophy and about how it should go about its business. We still teach our students the value of asking probing questions, of insisting upon careful distinctions, of calibrating our claims to the evidence, and of knowing what we don't know. Following Socrates, we in addition continue to draw a sharp line between philosophy and sophistry.

The most any of this establishes, however, is that Plato's *Dialogues* are *useful* for conveying lessons about the nature and practice of philosophy. It is hardly obvious that the very same lessons cannot be effectively communicated without turning our attention to the past, whether to Socrates or to any other historical figure. Even if we accept that the Platonic *Dialogues* exemplify features of sound philosophical practice, it seems far-fetched to conclude from this that we can *only* teach these skills by directing our students' attention to ancient Greece.

Even less persuasive is the proposal that, if we wish to introduce our students to the *doctrines* of logic or theory of knowledge or value theory, we need to familiarize them with the history of any of these branches of philosophy. It may be true that, if we are looking for a rich discussion of the thesis in political philosophy that "might makes right," for instance, we can hardly do better than recall Plato's portrayal of Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. But we can surely also find powerful expressions of this idea in later, even contemporary, philosophy. And although it is undoubtedly fruitful to return to the ancient Pyrrhonians or to Descartes for skeptical arguments about the evidence of the senses, many if not all of these lessons have been effectively communicated more recently and in various media. Think, for example, of the film, *The Matrix*.

We still lack good reasons, then, for insisting upon the *necessity* of a study of the history of philosophy, that is, for demonstrating its value for more than the satisfaction of our curiosity or antiquarian appetites. Some of us may be keen to discover how logic as it is practiced now owes many of its features to the ancient traditions of Parmenides or Ibn Rushd (Averroes); we may be curious to learn how the field has evolved over time and developed powerful new tools — tools not available, for example, to those earlier thinkers. Today's philosophy student might find these facts about the past intriguing, just as today's medical student might be gratified to learn about the progress her field has made since Hippocrates or Huangdi. But none of this establishes that the contemporary medical student (or student of chemistry

[2] See Kant's Fifth Thesis in his 1784 essay, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View".

or physics) *must* familiarize herself with the history of her subject if she wishes to master it, nor have we yet established why the student of logic (or of ethics or epistemology) *requires* exposure to the history of any of these branches of philosophy.

If we are to make a case for the indispensability of a knowledge of philosophy's history, then, we are going to have to work harder. Perhaps the following story will help move this effort along. Recently, I joined colleagues in interviewing a bright young philosopher for an academic job. The candidate had been trained by a top-ranked philosophy program, a program reputed to be "cutting edge" in a certain branch of contemporary philosophy but weak in the history of philosophy. It quickly became clear during the interview that, clever as the candidate was, he had been carrying out his philosophical conversations in something of a vacuum. His chosen conversation partners were others who read the same works, spoke the same philosophical language, and were animated by the very same issues. The candidate had difficulty translating his research program into terms we non-specialists could comprehend. Worse, he did not seem *aware* of the extent to which his efforts to communicate were falling short. He was so trapped in his bubble, he could build no bridge to viewpoints outside it, nor could he see the need to do so. He was baffled by the fact that the problems that fascinated him did not seem particularly new to his interviewers; he was unaware that they came across as reformulations of old debates.

The moral I believe we should draw from this story is not that the forms of blindness from which the young candidate suffered afflict only those preoccupied, as he was, with contemporary philosophy. Specialization of *any* kind narrows one's gaze, and the historian can be blinded by it, too. She will suffer from it if she focusses her attention too exclusively on a single period or figure or ideological orientation. How serious a limitation is this kind of narrowness? It is obviously serious if one hopes to communicate beyond the confines of one's bubble. The candidate we interviewed was applying for the position of philosophy instructor. He was unable to convince us, however, that he could effectively explain his ideas to anyone other than specialists in his field.

So far, this much seems clear: knowledge of the history of philosophy can serve as a healthy antidote to the narrowness of specialization. It can broaden one's horizons and open up new worlds, similar to the way that travel can. If I've never left the town in which I was born and raised, my perspective will be severely constrained. What tools will I have for comparing features of my culture with those of others? In the absence of tools for comparison, how will I even be capable of picking out my culture's salient features? What resources will I have at my disposal for critical assessment or reflection? If I've, for instance, never lived except under the stronghold of a tyrant and lack exposure to different forms of governance, how will I be able to imagine a possible alternative?

This argument for why philosophy should familiarize itself with its history is essentially a "more is better" argument. If I dare to venture beyond the borders of my hometown, I gain exposure to conceptual tools I did not formerly possess. By broadening my acquaintance with new environments and cultures, I add to my store of resources for description and evaluation; I become better equipped to assess the world I left behind. The same is true if I explore disciplines other than those I know best. If I educate myself about botany, I am rewarded with an enrichment of my experience of nature. Previously, when I walked in the woods, I enjoyed the different shape and sizes of mostly green and brown plants. Now, however, and thanks to my newly acquired botanical categories, I notice an overwhelming abundance of diverse life forms; I appreciate differences of which I was never before aware. For the first time, I am able to *see* that birches are different than beeches, and that not all mosses or ferns are alike. My perception of nature is radically altered.

Philosophy insists upon the importance of drawing distinctions. It recognizes the value of this skill as necessary for getting at the truth, that is, for seeing reality more clearly and completely. Philosophy's history is a treasure trove of conceptual resources. It exposes us to countless ways in which philosophical problems have been construed and motivated; it discloses multiple modes of description and critical assessment. A study of philosophy's history enlarges the contents of our conceptual toolbox. In doing so, it offers us resources for identifying and challenging our assumptions, including those we hold most dear. These are the assumptions that are most likely to escape our critical scrutiny — even our bare awareness. An acquaintance with philosophy's history, however, gives us tools for making even these most basic assumptions perspicuous. We thereby gain a means of escaping what Bertrand Russell described as the "tyranny of custom."[3]

Admittedly, we can enlarge our stash of concepts and methods in other ways. Today's student of contemporary *analytic* approaches to the philosophy of mind can for instance engage with colleagues well-versed in contemporary *non-analytic* approaches to the same subject. Or, she can direct her attention to wholly different areas of contemporary philosophical interest and expose herself not just to

[3] See the final chapter of his 1912 *Problems of Philosophy* where Russell writes that philosophy offers us "possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the *tyranny of custom*". It is worth noting that this remark belongs to his plea not for the necessity of a study of the history of philosophy but simply for the necessity of philosophy. "The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense".

the work of David Chalmers but also to that of Luce Irigaray or Charles Mills. She can take the even more radical step of educating herself in subjects other than philosophy (perhaps botany!). There is, in other words, a great deal a philosopher can do to enhance her supply of critical resources without having to dig out old philosophical doctrines and texts. But if we accept that much is to be gained by expanding one's conceptual repertoire, and if we are therefore persuaded that "more" is indeed "better" in this respect, why would we want to deny ourselves *any* opportunity for such expansion? If philosophy's commitment to acquiring tools for critical reflection and criticism is sincere, it has no good reason to discourage the study of its history.

II

The "more is better" argument I have just sketched isn't simply about quantity. That is, the argument isn't just that philosophy needs to know its history because doing so increases its fund of concepts and methods. The deeper point ties the acquisition of these additional resources to philosophy's central vocation: the pursuit of truth. Knowledge of the riches contained in its history is indispensable insofar as philosophy's objective is to get at what is *true*.

An example may help illustrate the point. Let's suppose we seek an accurate representation of the political philosophy of John Rawls. Rawls presents his theory of justice as an alternative to utilitarianism and as more closely allied with a Kantian approach. But in what respect is his approach Kantian, exactly? Rawls argues that, if we are to isolate the key ingredients of a just society, our task should not be to perform the utilitarian calculus of determining what would maximize happiness for its members. A just society, on Rawls's account, rests instead on principles that are fair. We identify those principles by performing a "veil of ignorance" thought-experiment. Rawls's insight is that we are much better positioned to identify principles of a genuinely fair society if we select them from behind this veil, that is, if we are ignorant of key facts about ourselves, facts that would incline us to prejudice our own case. What the veil of ignorance experiment requires, in particular, is that we abstract away any knowledge we might have of features determining our place or status in society (economic status, natural gifts or talents, skin color, sex, and so forth).

Again, Rawls's thought-experiment is intended to give us a method for identifying principles that are fair. A system of law is fair if it honors the idea that all humans are of *equal* worth or dignity, and that contingent factors such as wealth or naturally given talents or traits (such as skin color or sex) are of no relevance when it comes to determining who is entitled to just treatment. As Rawls would admit, this focus on fairness or impartiality is what gives the argument its particularly Kantian character.

Rawls explicitly identifies his general orientation as Kantian rather than utilitarian, but is it Kantian in every respect? It is in setting out to answer this question that we reveal why history matters. Rawls and many of his disciples prefer to take their Kant light, leaving aside some of its arguably implausible metaphysical underpinnings. But this implies that their vision of the just society *departs* from Kant's to some extent. Although a just society for the Rawlsian is fair in that it honors the dignity or worth of all, the Rawlsian conception of human dignity is significantly different from its Kantian counterpart. For Kant, we have a dignity only thanks to our autonomy, that is, our capacity for freedom. Moreover, Kantian freedom is strictly speaking "transcendental" or "noumenal"; it is a causal power that has its basis outside nature. Kant identifies his concept of freedom as an "idea of reason"; as such, it can be given neither scientific explanation nor justification. Rawls and his followers prefer not to follow Kant down this path, and they may have good reasons for their resistance. But this departure implies that their approach is in a certain respect *not* Kantian. Kant goes to great lengths to reject efforts to rest political as well as moral philosophy on a non-noumenal or merely empirical account of the nature of human freedom. For better or worse, he is persuaded that he must defend a "transcendental" or "noumenal" conception of freedom if he is to properly justify practical principles at all.

What this brief story suggests is that we can only effectively assess the extent to which Rawls and his followers are truly Kantian if we consult the historical record and turn our attention back to Kant. History sensitizes us to context; sensitivity to context instructs us that terms like "freedom" and "dignity" take on different meanings in the systems of different philosophers. Philosophers bring unique motivations to their inquiries, and they set out to solve problems by means of their own specific conceptual tools and methods. There's no way to learn the *truth* about Rawls's Kantianism except by getting clear on *Kant*; and there is no way to do that without taking a journey down history's path.

We can apply this same lesson about the need for history to the job interview case I considered earlier. The candidate could have better articulated the nature and significance of his philosophical topic had he been able to give us more evidence of his sensitivity to history. He was interested in exploring a recent development in the epistemological debate between idealism and realism. What he failed to make clear, however, was *how* this development was new; he seemed to lack tools for comparing it to previous instantiations. He was therefore unable to convey, except superficially, why his project was of interest.

Even giving ourselves the briefest reminder of the history of the idealism versus realism debate, we can hardly fail to notice that it is a long and winding path, comprised of a series of shifts in the stakes of the debate and in the meanings of its key concepts. On the side of realism is the assumption (very roughly) that the mind can access

or know reality, that our concepts (or ideas or beliefs) are capable of mirroring their objects. The idealist seeks to persuade us, in contrast, that we have direct cognitive access only to ideas. For the idealist, that is, only ideas or concepts are the immediate objects of awareness or knowledge. If, for the sake of simplicity, we restrict our attention to the idealisms of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century western Europe, our tale might continue with the observation that we encounter markedly different accounts of the precise nature and implications of both idealism and realism during this period. For David Hume, for example, idealism implied a particular form of skepticism about our prospects for knowing nature. From his assumption that we have immediate cognitive contact only with ideas, Hume concluded that we cannot justify the optimistic realist thesis that we are capable of cognitive contact with the true nature of things. For Hume, we are in effect trapped behind a veil of ideas.

History instructs us that Hume was primarily responding to the realism of John Locke. Moving our review forward to Kant, we discover that the philosophical context shifts, and that idealism takes on a new form. Kant insisted that his idealism was *compatible* with realism of a certain kind and therefore capable of circumventing Hume's skeptical result. Kant sought to persuade us that objects of nature ("appearances") are ideal in that we can know them only as conditioned by a priori forms of sensibility, namely space and time. Kant furthermore argued, however, that the dependence of those objects on the a priori conditions of our knowing them in no way compromises their reality. Our knowledge is limited to appearances, but on Kant's definition, "appearances" refer to possible objects of perception or experience. Appearances, for Kant, are, in other words, as real as can be.

These brief histories contain lessons about the context dependency of meaning.[4] More importantly, they reveal why a sensitivity to context is crucial if what we are after is *truth*. We cannot get at the truth about Rawls's claim to be a Kantian without a historically well-informed grasp of Kant's unique conception of freedom with all its metaphysical underpinnings. Nor can we shed sufficient light on what is at stake in the idealism versus realism debate if we are ignorant of the debate's history with its shifting terms and definitions. We are handicapped in our efforts to grasp the precise nature of Hume's idealism if we have not first familiarized ourselves with Locke. We likewise cannot fully appreciate Kant's idealism if we know little about the positions to which he was responding. If we wish to be doggedly *thorough* in our endeavors (and happen to have a great deal of time on our hands), what we really need to do is start from the beginning and brush up on our Plato and Aristotle.

III

Before concluding, I wish to offer a final argument in favor of the thesis that philosophy needs to know its history. This will be a further defense of the view that a grasp of history is not only useful but *necessary* in the service of the philosopher's main vocation, the pursuit of truth. What I will urge is that philosophy's acquaintance with its history gives it unique tools for exposing and debunking a certain powerful and pervasive myth. The myth is expressed in a cluster of assumptions about where our ideas come from, about the nature and limits of our creativity and the materials of our imagination.

The myth relies on the premise that true freedom and creativity depend upon a capacity for radical detachment and forgetting, that is, upon the ability to abstract the past entirely away. According to this view, genuinely original ideas spring only from minds that are completely unburdened or unconditioned by history, minds illuminated perhaps by the light of "pure" reason or by an imagination able to produce its contents solely out of its own resources. The assumption that some ideas are generated in this way, as if ex nihilo, is furthermore supposed to explain their effectiveness in propelling our thinking radically forward.

The myth is attractive for a variety of reasons. After all, who among us would *not* like to claim sole authorship of their creative products, whether those products appear in the form of personality transformations or philosophical insights? If I am the author of an idea, I get to take credit for it. Especially if my idea strikes another's fancy, my "ownership" of it gratifies my vanity or self-esteem. There is in addition something deeply satisfying about the thought that I can wholly liberate myself from my past and make a fresh start. The suggestion that I might be endowed with this degree of causal power is irresistible.

Let's assume for the sake of argument that we actually possess these powers of total detachment or abstraction. It's reasonable to ask what we would stand to gain, were we to exercise them. Were a person to wipe away all their prior experiences and relations, what would be left — that is, what kind of self? Were an entire people or nation likewise to perform this abstraction, what means would it have for drawing the precise lines of its national identity? Why should we be persuaded that any self or nation, conceived of as a blank slate or empty vessel, has an identity at all? Perhaps we feel exhilaration at the prospect of starting anew and from an entirely blank slate, but an entirely blank slate is empty and formless, giving us nothing to start with. What can really be so exhilarating about starting with nothing?

[4] For a recent eloquent defense of the context dependency of meaning, see Hannah Ginsborg's "History of Philosophy as a Source of Meaning", *European Journal of Philosophy*, forthcoming. The point is also persuasively argued in Bernard Williams's essay, "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline", *Philosophy*, vol. 72, no. 294 (October 2002): pp. 477-496. See especially section 5.

Even should we grant the attractiveness of this myth of unfettered freedom and creativity, it is a myth nonetheless, and it has been exposed as such by many a shrewd philosopher. Take Nietzsche, for instance, for whom there can be no path to freedom or enlightenment for those who are blind to the road they have traveled. Nietzsche experienced his modern western European culture as sick, and he was convinced that its cure had to involve a retrieval or recollection of its past. He was convinced that his culture needed to turn its attention to the *source* of its values. It was dominated by Christianity, but its ignorance of its history resulted in its failure to fully grasp the value of its values. It could not sufficiently appreciate why it judged certain acts "good" and others "evil" because it was unaware of the layers of meaning underlying these terms. It was in no position to acknowledge, then, that lurking behind or beneath what it deemed "good" was something bad or unhealthy. As Nietzsche tells his genealogical story, one thing the Christianity of his culture failed to notice was how its superficially irreproachable virtues of brotherly love and mercy were rooted in and therefore also expressions of feelings of impotence and self-loathing. Underlying the Christian ("slave") mentality was a long history of resentment toward a competing value-culture (that of the "warriors" or "aristocrats"), a culture that prized self-assertion and confidence over submissiveness and meekness.

Needless to say, not all histories are credible, and we may have good reasons for challenging Nietzsche's specific diagnosis of his culture's troubles. Nonetheless, he was sensible enough to recognize the folly of efforts to forget or ignore history. He knew that if we ignore our history or dismiss it as irrelevant, we not only risk repeating old mistakes but cut ourselves off from vital clues to who we are and what we care about.

It is a bit of good fortune that, at least in the Anglo-American world of contemporary academic philosophy with which I am familiar, this Nietzschean lesson seems to have been taken to heart. Today's genealogists are filling in significant gaps in philosophy's account of its history. They are shining new light on who has and has not had a hand in the writing of that history, in determining which works should and should not be included in its canon, and in deciding which problems merit attention. This careful revisionist work is giving us a fuller, more accurate picture of the discipline and of the socio-economic factors that have determined who has enjoyed a place among its major players.[5]

The Nietzschean insight I wish to emphasize, in closing, is that genealogical research unearths distant origins and hidden meanings. If it is well grounded in the facts, it reveals the stuff out of which identity is made. If a person has no story to tell about her history, she is effectively no one — at least, no one distinguishable from anyone else. If a philosopher likewise has nothing to say about the ancestry of her concepts, about the context from which they derive their significance and meaning, her grasp of them will be superficial at best.

Nietzsche's predecessor Hegel seems to me to have appreciated these lessons as well as or better than anyone. His central works take the form of genealogies or origin stories, and this is no accident. Prior to Nietzsche, Hegel waged his own war against forgetting. He knew he stood no chance of producing informative treatments of the animating philosophical questions of his day without inquiring into their source. His histories, like Nietzsche's, warrant critical scrutiny; they need to be tested against the facts just as all histories do.[6] But Hegel's histories have the virtue of sensitizing us to the way in which philosophy's story reveals a series of transformations in the meanings of our terms and in our problem-solving resources. His narratives repeatedly convey the message that, regarding both the origin of our ideas and our expressions of freedom, there are no virgin births. No person or people can forge an identity out of nothing; no idea can appear from nowhere. Philosophy ignores its history at its peril, for the philosophy that is "the latest in time" is the "result of all the preceding philosophies" (*Encyclopaedia Logic*, §13).

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Sally Sedgwick is Professor of Philosophy at Boston University. Her publications include *Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: An Introduction* (2008), *Hegel's Critique of Kant* (2012), and *Time and History in Hegelian Thought and Spirit* (2023).

[5] It pleases me to note that some of this important historical research is being carried out by colleagues in my own Department.

[6] Needless to say, Hegel's histories have been subject to a great deal of scrutiny. See, for example, the most recent issue of the *Hegel Bulletin* which is dedicated to the theme, "Racism and Colonialism in Hegel's Philosophy", Vol. 45, no. 2 (Summer 2024).