

Philosophy and History - *Coining, Context, Contingency* – Notes: Bob Clarke, June 2018

Jottings for an Exploration of the *Perennial* and the *Historically Contingent* in Philosophy.

What are the most fruitful ways for philosophy and history to interact?

1. The *Zeitgeist* – The Philosophical ‘*Spirit of the Age*’.

Ideas about the *historical development of human nature* (or our ‘*psyche*’) were *mixed* in the **Enlightenment** (18th C): **Some** asserted its *perennial constancy*, e.g. **David Hume**: ‘*It is universally acknowledged, that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. ... Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English.*’, David Hume, *Enquiry*, Section 8, (1748).

- But all agreed that the **Pursuit of Reason** and **Social and Political Reform** could improve the human lot: Enlightened adoption of *rational* and *moral* social and political policies would achieve this.

(Perhaps: ‘No need to *change* human nature – just be *good!* – that’s well within our *existing* capabilities’!?)

But others (**Vico**, **Leibniz**), posited a **Destiny** (‘Perfection’ - **Leibniz**) or **Progress** (**Kant** on Enlightenment: *Aufklärung*: ‘*man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity*’ (1784)), or, at least, some substantive **historical changes**.

See: **Leon Pompa**, ‘*Human Nature and Historical Knowledge*’, (1990); **Matt Timmel**, ‘*The Rise of History*’ (2007).

- *Intellectuals* may take this line, but it takes something more for ideas to be *broadly* accepted. The late-18th-C ‘**Historical Turn**’ in philosophy took place against the background of **The Industrial Revolution** and **The French Revolution**: perspicuous changes to human life-experiences, societies and politics that *could not be reversed*.

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744 – 1803) coined the term **Zeitgeist** as early as 1769, but, with these Revolutions, the *historical evolution of human perceptions & motivations* (i.e. our *psyche*) became a widely accepted thesis by 1800.

- In this atmosphere **Hegel** (1770 – 1831) developed his *Historical Dialectic*, followed by **Karl Marx** (1818 - 83).

2. Etymology: What can the *coining* of philosophical words tell us about the evolution of our Western *Zeitgeist*?

See: *The OED*, *The Etymological Dictionary On-line* and *The Keywords* website: <http://keywords.pitt.edu/>

A Case Study – the concept ‘**Empathy**’: ‘*placing oneself in another person’s shoes*’: understanding their emotional state by understanding their experience of life: one might think it a morally important human skill.

- ‘**Empathy**’ is not to be confused with ‘*sympathy*’, ‘*compassion*’, ‘*pity*’: it is *not* just an emotion, it requires our intellectual input to enable us to understand (and perhaps experience) others’ joys, as well as their pains.
- ‘**Empathy**’ has become an accepted scientific concept. The implication from the writings of **Simon Baren-Cohen** and **Frans de Waal** is that empathy is *perennial* and shared by other species.

See: **Simon Baren-Cohen**, (2012), **Frans de Waal**, (2010), also the *Keywords* and *Empathy* websites.

- **But** the word ‘**Empathy**’ was only coined in **1904** from German ‘*Einfühlung*’ (literally ‘*in-feeling*’)! If **Empathy** has been so morally important and *perennial* for us, why did the word not exist before that? Did we, rather, have no need of it previously because our *psyche* actually ‘*changed*’ in the 20th Century?
- **Furthermore**: according to the **Oxford English Dictionary** (OED) the word ‘**Empathy**’ was *initially* (1904) a purely *aesthetic*, i.e. an *art-critical*, term. The first quotation in the OED of ‘**Empathy**’ with the meaning ‘*The ability to understand and appreciate another person’s feelings, experience, etc.*’ is in **1946!**
- Not until **1963** does the word ‘**Empathy**’ come into wide usage in our ethical sense with **Robert L. Katz**’s book ‘*Empathy – Its Nature and Uses*’!! *What does this tell us about our evolving ethical Zeitgeist?*
- **Proposal**: the coining of the term ‘**Empathy**’ reflects not so much a change in our nature, but rather our attempts to gain a greater *self-awareness* of how we deal with others. Thus, we may *always* have exercised empathy, but have had little need to analyse that capacity deeply until 1946. Why might that be?
- Thus: changes in the *Zeitgeist* *may* arise not so much from changes in our *psyche*, but rather from our attempts to achieve *self-understanding*: phenomenology, psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, anthropology, neurology, etc.

This is an important issue: some thinkers have argued that *substantive* changes in our *psyche* *have* occurred quite recently in history, i.e. over 100s rather than 10,000s (or millions) of years - well within *historical*, rather than *pre-historical*, times. See: **J Jaynes** on *The Bi-cameral Mind*; **D Konstan**, ‘*Before Forgiveness*’; **R. F. Baumeister** on *The Self*.

Do we witness substantive changes in human nature or else changes in our attempted self-knowledge?

We need a historical dimension in our philosophy to address these issues.

3. History-Based Philosophy: *Some Wrong Directions ... ?*

3.1 What is 'Historicism'? There are (at least!) **two** models of 'Historicism': Iggers' & Popper's:

1. **George Iggers**: *'The outlook on the world which recognizes the historical character of all existence; but views history not as an integrated system but as a scene in which a diversity of human wills express themselves.'*

- "Historicism" entry in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, vol. 2, p. 458

- I take this definition to be consistent with the above ideas about *Zeitgeist*. -

2. **Karl Popper**: *'... an approach to the social sciences which assumes that historical prediction is their principal aim...'*, *'The belief ... that it is the task of the social sciences to lay bare the law of evolution of society in order to foretell its future... might be described as the central Historicist doctrine.'* - Popper, *'The Poverty of Historicism'* (1957).

Popper (1903 – 1994), from the 1930s, criticised Hegel & Marx for promoting the idea that the *Purpose* of the study of History was to understand its *Developmental Laws*. Let us call Popper's notion '**Teleological Historicism**'.

- I propose that **Teleological Historicism** can be rejected on the grounds of: (1) **pervading contingency** in human affairs, (2) our understanding, since the 1970s, that even well-ordered *Dynamical Systems* can be unpredictable: the scientific notion of '**Chaos**', (3) '**Knife-edge**' situations (in science: *'spontaneous symmetry breaking'*)!
- Historicism appreciated via *Zeitgeist* in Iggers' sense is viable, but **Teleological Historicism** is untenable.
- **We**, *autonomously*, can add purpose & goals to history, but it has no power to impose upon us, *heteronomously*, its 'own' purposes and goals: there is no human 'destiny' unless **we** fight for it!

Teleological Historicism grossly undervalues the influence of contingency and dynamic unpredictability in History.

3.2 **Historism** is the idea that philosophy **reduces** to History & its contingencies. (**NB.** *Historism* is **not** *Historicism*!)

R G Collingwood (1889 -1943) placed historical understanding at the centre of his philosophy

See: Collingwood, *'The Idea of History'*, and *'An Autobiography'*.

He refers to **Benedetto Croce**: *'Philosophy is only a constituent element within history ...'*, *Idea of History*, p.197.

- Historism denies the **Validity of the Perennial** in Philosophy. *Are Croce and Collingwood guilty of Historism??*

3.3 'Great Men' Histories!

Socrates->Plato->Aristotle-> ... Descartes -> ... Kant-> Hegel -> ... Wittgenstein ... all with minimal historical context!

Copernicus->Kepler->Newton-> ... Einstein-> ... Hawking -> ... all with minimal historical context!

... as if *Philosophers* and *Scientists* exist in their own isolated universe, cut-off from the rest of the world.

Anachronism: as if their intentions were our intentions - no recognition of their own *Zeitgeist* and social **contexts**!

This is Philosophically Untenable (and sexist!); See: e.g. **Clifford D Conner**, *'A People's History of Science'*, (2005).

3.4 'Whig History'

Very similar: past agents (including the 'Great Men') are seen as working towards our 'enlightened' position today!
'Whig History' as retrospective teleology: *what we have today (which we approve of) has pulled the past towards us!*

See: **Herbert Butterfield** ... *'The Whig Interpretation of History'* (1931). This is Philosophically Untenable!

NB. This actually pre-dates the 'Whigs': note the Medieval view that Plato & Aristotle were proto-Christians.

- *If the above are erroneous ways of aligning history with philosophy, what are more fruitful ways? –*

(i) *Recognise Historical Context*, (ii) *Avoid Historical Dogma*, (iii) *Recognise Historical Contingency*.

4. Historical Context

Historians of Ideas contend that **Philosophy** 'often' (i.e. normally) **grossly underplays** the importance of **Historical Context** in the development of philosophical ideas. **Appreciation of Historical Context is Essential!**

Example: Understanding **Wittgenstein**: Turn to *Fin de Siècle* Vienna: Janik & Toulmin, *'Wittgenstein's Vienna'*, (1973).

Also: go back to the **Very Start of Western Philosophy**, to the **Presocratics**. Why did Western Philosophy (reportedly) start in **Miletus** in Ionia, in Asia Minor, circa 600 - 550 BCE, when **Thales**, **Anaximander** & **Anaximenes** asked the question: *'What is the basic substance (the 'arche') from which all other materials derive?'*

See: **Richard Seaford**, *'Money and the Early Greek Mind'*, (2004): he argues that it may be *because of the invention of* **Coinage** - exactly *there and then*: **Miletus was the first fully monetised society** (he says)!

What is Money if not an abstract substance that can be turned into other substances?

Another Example: **Anaximander's** philosophy of the *Shape of the Earth* ('like a column drum') and of the *Cosmos*. **Robert Hahn** in '*Anaximander and the Architects*', (2001) argues that it was influenced by the **Architecture** of the massive Ionic Greek temples that were being built in the vicinity of Miletus in Anaximander's day.

See: also **Dirk Couprie**, '*The Discovery of Space: Anaximander's Astronomy*', in '*Anaximander in Context*', (2003).

On the Presocratics one may respond: '*This is pure speculation!*'. Certainly! But we learn by speculating: Scientific hypotheses are speculations! Fundamental physicists make a living by speculating!
(ps. You can see some of the actual column drums Anaximander was referring to in the British Museum!)

5. Historically Informed Philosophy: Question Outdated Mind-Sets. Question Dogmatic Views from the Past

Take a lesson from **Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889 - 1951), *Philosophical Investigations*, 309:

The Fly: *The Purpose of Philosophy is to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle*. But a good way to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle is to show it how it got in there in the first place! i.e. learn from history!

Our philosophy is littered with notions from the past: perhaps we should tidy up our house & sweep some of them away. Or, *at least*, let us examine them to see which of them we can fruitfully brush-up & retain. Examples:

- **Terry Eagleton**, '*Culture*' (2016) on the **Death of God**, p. 140: '*... the modern era is littered with failed substitutes for God, from reason, spirit, art, science ... A great many aesthetic terms (symbol, creation, inspiration, revelation, unity, epiphany, autonomy and so on) are bits of displaced theology*'.
- Most of us are no longer **Cartesian Dualists**, yet we often express the idea that human consciousness is awareness of a *different kind* from other forms of animal awareness (e.g. perceptions, sensibility, etc.).
- **Reductionism** gives us simple mechanical explanations. But it appeals to an outdated physics – to **Classical Physics**. The ontology of **Quantum Mechanics** (QM) is much more obscure (*and holistic!*). The ontology of **Quantum Field Theory** (QFT) is even more obscure! We are appealing to a simplicity which is no longer viable. Stuck in the past! Why, these days, appeal to physics at all? *We are trying to explain the obscure by the even-more-obscure!!!*
- The very idea of **Perennial Truths** was derived from the attributes of an eternal, omniscient, omnipotent God. Most of us do not believe in him anymore, why accept them unchallenged? **Nietzsche's Madman** (see: '*The Gay Science*') pointed out that we had murdered our God. **God is Dead!** But we have not accepted the consequences yet!
- Maybe there is hope! Today, even Physicists turn to History!!: *Physics Today*, '*Why should physicists study history?*', M. Stanley, July 2016, p. 38. **Carlo Rovelli**, '*Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*', (2014), '*Reality is not what it Seems*', (2016), '*The First Scientist – Anaximander and his Legacy*', (2011).

6. The Contingency of the Human Species – it starts with the Philosophy of **Life!**

Stephen Jay Gould (1941 – 2002), '*Wonderful Life*' (1989), discusses the sheer **contingency** of Biological Evolution.

Alicia Juarrero, '*Dynamics in Action*' (1999):

'... complex adaptive systems are essentially historical. They embody in their very structure the conditions under which they were created (including the chance events around which each self-organized stage reorganizes)'.

- This insight applies across evolutionary history and to our culture's and our own intellectual development:

'No city or monument is much more than 5000 years old. Only about 70 lifetimes, of 70 years, have been lived end to end since civilization began. Its entire run occupies 0.2% of the 2.5 million years since our first ancestor sharpened a stone': Ronald Wright, '*A Short History of Progress*', (2004).

** Our **Species† Autobiography** tells us what we are and therefore what philosophy is available to us **.

† or cultural ... or personal autobiography ... (note that autobiography is rarely impartial !)

Hegel: '*The Fundamental Category is Being*' - Sarah Reilly: '**No** - *Our Fundamental Category is Food!*'

'*We are what we eat!*' – both gastronomically and intellectually!

Manipulation of the Past: We need to own our autobiography and be honest about it. There are many political and ideological attempts to manipulate it or take it away from us. See George Orwell '*1984*', (1948), Hobsbawm & Ranger, '*The Invention of Tradition*', (1983). Revolutionaries and terrorists destroy our cultural heritage to rob us of our past: this is a form of cultural genocide according to Robert Bevan: '*The Destruction of Memory*' (2006 & 2017).

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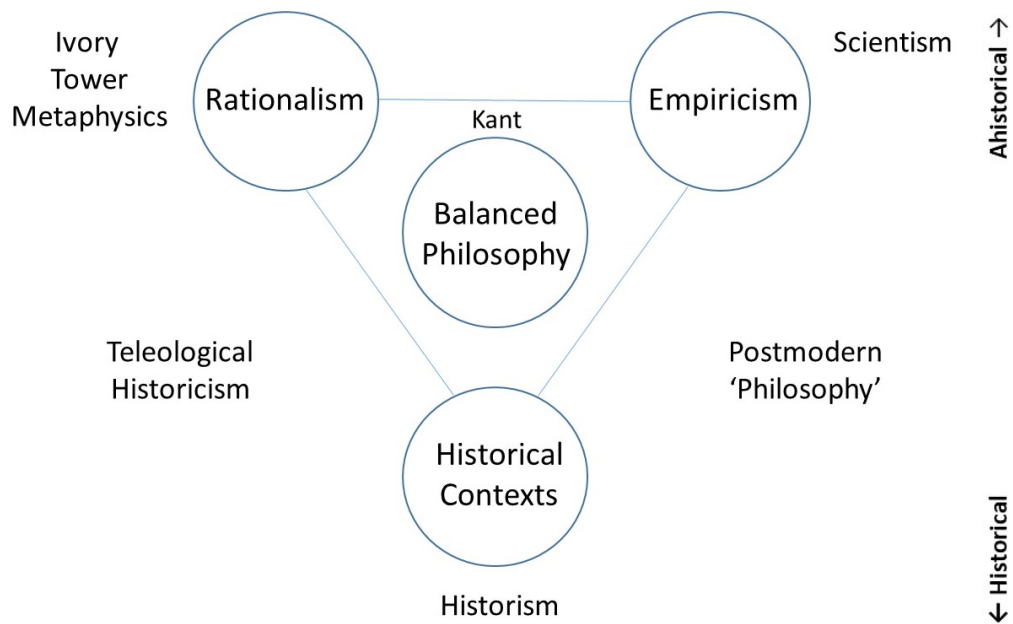
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An Exploration of the **Perennial** and the **Historically Contingent** in Philosophy.
What are the most fruitful ways for philosophy and history to interact?

Balanced Philosophy – Move Philosophy to the Centre of the Diagram:



Summary:

1. The *Zeitgeist* – The Philosophical Spirit of the Age.
2. Coining of Philosophical Words: Etymology – including a Case Study on 'Empathy'
3. History-Based Philosophy: *Some Wrong Directions* ... ?
4. Historical Context
5. Historically Informed Philosophy: *Questioning Historical Mind-Sets*.
6. The Historical Contingency of the Human Species