

REFLECTIONS ON THE SUBJECT  
MATTER OF THE HISTORY  
OF PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>

I

The expression commonly employed, “history of philosophy,” often seems either inexact or incomplete, depending on whether the term “philosophy” is understood to mean a system of the sciences or whether it is taken in the historic sense. In the first case, what is in question is a certain *ideal system* of well-founded questions and of exact and logically demonstrated affirmations relative to the objects of a certain domain. So defined, philosophy is not the object of this study. In the second case, the historic sense, the term “philosophy” designates a collection of questions and affirmations growing and changing *in time*,

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

1. *Diogenes* published in No. 20 a study by Professor Ladislas Tatarkiewicz on “The History of Philosophy and the Art of Writing It.” The following text, by Professor Ingarden, deals with the same problem from a different point of view.

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effectively expressed in a given time and by specific men. They ought to concern the objects of the domain of philosophy in the sense of systematic exposition, whose content, however, itself underwent notable changes in the course of the development of philosophy in the historical sense—particularly of European philosophy. In the spirit of their authors they ought to be true. However, according to all probability, many of them are false or at least insufficiently founded. They are, moreover, the intentional products of a certain number of cognitive, human acts. But they result at the same time—in their properties, their content, their formulation, the mode of their justification—from the influence of other states and extra-cognitive attitudes of philosophers: various sentiments, desires, religious beliefs, etc. It is therefore improper to speak of the “history of philosophy” in the sense of a philosophic system, for, in this sense, philosophy insofar as it is an ideal, extra-temporal product can have no kind of history. If, on the other hand, this expression is intended to involve a question of philosophy in the historic sense, it is necessary to complete it by specifying that in the given historic consideration we are dealing with the evolution of a given philosophy—for example, of Greek philosophy from Thales to the death of Aristotle. So understood, the history of philosophy is an empirical discipline relative to certain empirical facts which occur in time. It is necessary to bear clearly in mind the nature of these acts: Is it a question only of a certain collection of phrases, or of something more?

## II

The collection of phrases that constitute philosophy in the historical sense *varies* in many respects:

A. First, the sphere of “real” objects—more precisely, objects with autonomous existence relative to the affirmations themselves—to which the affirmations considered at different periods as “philosophic” referred, was variable. There is a history apart from the variations of this *sphere* of objects, notably a variation of “philosophic” affirmations, which express them in European philosophy, for example.

B. Within a certain determined sphere of objects taken at a certain period or at different moments, there are variations.

1. First, the quantity of *affirmations effectively expressed* or discussed

at particular moments of time was variable. It always includes a certain number of affirmations derived from a previous period and of new affirmations expressed at a given moment. The relationship of the number and the choice of new affirmations to old also varies according to the time, and yet the role which these two types of expressions plays in philosophic discussions changes.

2. Among the affirmations effectively expressed, there are some which have been made durable by means of books. The relationship of these last to all philosophic affirmations also varies with periods. At certain times there are very few writings, philosophers being content to expound their thought in oral discussions. At other times, on the contrary, they seek to write as much as they can of that which they affirm.

3. All the affirmations expressed up to a certain moment are not effectively known or employed in discussions at a given moment in the development of philosophy. In each period different affirmations are treated, while others escape memory. The more the quantity of known affirmations increases, the more the degree of philosophic formation and culture also increases. When it diminishes, philosophic culture is reduced to that extent; but this does not exclude a certain development of the philosophy peculiar to a given period.

4. Among the written, known affirmations, one must distinguish, on the one hand, those that have been *admitted as true* or at least probable at a given period and, on the other hand, the group of affirmations which are rejected or combated and, finally, those which are simply omitted as devoid of all "significance." And even from this point of view changes and cleavages are produced not only in the quantity but also in the quality of the affirmations commonly admitted. Most frequently they constitute a heterogeneous group which is divided into subgroups, often opposed and even contradictory in periods in which there exist many currents of antagonistic ideas. From this point of view, too, numerous and various changes take place in the course of time.

5. Finally, among the philosophic affirmations, and primarily among the notions they contain, there exists a group of affirmations or notions that are *dominant*, *directive*, and the *influence* of which becomes determinant for the elaboration of new notions and affirmations. It is a question here not of some logical dependence but of the particular roles that the respective affirmations or notions play in the spirit of the philosophers, by virtue of a particular expansiveness or dynamism or be-

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cause they are capable of provoking new affirmations or questions. They become the center of an entire philosophic movement upon which other movements depend for their existence and their configurations—if only because of their opposed characteristics, as if, in certain respects, they were tributary to it. In the course of the development of philosophy, continuous changes occur in the directive or dominant role of these ideas or affirmations or of these philosophic movements as a whole. It is by this precisely that various periods differ from one another; that one or several new tendencies become dominant while those that were previously important disappear, having lost all their dynamism, only to suddenly re-emerge, sometimes after many long centuries, and to exert a fresh influence on men's minds, subjugating anew a given period, possibly in a slightly different form.

### III

In addition to a purely temporal arrangement among the affirmations as well as among the questions, there is still another arrangement which depends on their *content* with respect to logical relations and real connections of dependence among the states of things determined by these affirmations. It can be understood in a purely systematic sense as an ideal hierarchization resulting from real and logical relations or as an order of fact relative to the expression which states them at a given period. The first is unique in kind<sup>2</sup> and without change; but in principle it would be known only at the moment at which we would already have discovered all philosophy, in the systematic sense, perfectly completed—which practically never occurs. The second, on the other hand, can be diverse and can vary as to periods. Sometimes the one, sometimes the other, arrangement of affirmations and notions is admitted. At one time, for example, philosophic theories are considered as deductive, derived from a determined choice of axioms; at another time as an inductive science, organized from facts and relations which unite the philosophic theories to each other in reality, etc. In different philosophic tendencies, and often in the same periods, affirmations are arranged in different manners, from which there arise wholes of a higher order: philosophic movements.

2. Even though in certain cases there were two equivalent arrangements, or more, this number of possible equivalent arrangements would be unique and independent of the philosopher's inclination.

#### IV

Philosophic affirmations also vary equally with respect to the importance—theoretical, practical, or cultural—attributed to them at a given period. For example, at one time the greatest importance will be accorded to metaphysical affirmations, at another time to affirmations of ethics, and at still another time to the theory of knowledge. The same is true in the sphere of respective groups of affirmations; sometimes one group, at other times the others, exert a greater influence or are considered as the most important, only to lose their value and become negligible. As a consequence, in a given period, the general impression one has of philosophy also changes.

#### V

Among the changes we have already enumerated, there is still another deserving of our special attention. To be sure, as time passes, the concrete *content* of specific philosophical affirmations or questions is also subject to variations. Changes occur in the *intent* and *comprehension* of the notion contained in affirmations, owing, usually, to the philosophers' renewed activity—not only because of general progress but also because of a deeper examination of philosophy itself. Variations in the notional framework also frequently determine the true nature of the philosophy in a given period. However, that nature vanishes as this framework evolves, no matter how great the apparent degree of difference between fundamental affirmations happens to be.

#### VI

The affirmations and questions within the domain of philosophy, in the historic sense, are “solidified” in philosophic works. However, *philosophy*, in the sense of a certain arrangement of affirmations and questions stated in the course of inquiries renewed each time, must be distinguished from the *assemblage of philosophic works*. Such works constitute wholes of a superior order, constructed with more or less rigor with the aid of affirmations, questions, demonstrations, etc., determined in the course of the respective works. This arrangement of phrases in the course of a work, which serves to present certain philosophic concepts in a special way, does not necessarily correspond, and usually does not correspond, to the arrangement of phrases of other conceptions or of entire philosophic theories. Most of the time there is the relation

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of intersection, or at most of subordination, between the whole, consisting of the phrases of a certain philosophic work and the assemblage of affirmations of a certain conception or of a philosophic system. The works are not only the fragments of philosophic conceptions but also their particular aspect in the course of the respective works. The principles of composition in philosophic works can differ greatly. Some are conditioned by considerations regarding their effect upon the reader, whereas the arrangement of phrases in a philosophical conception or theory depends primarily upon their reciprocal, real, or logical relations, although in reality the effective formation of concepts or theories is likewise subject to lateral, and even somewhat to extra-cognitive, influences.

Besides the written philosophic works, there are also oral "works," particularly during certain periods; these are concrete, fixed in time, and brought into play in such events as lectures, philosophic discussions, etc. Although they do not become "solidified" in writings, they nonetheless constitute clearly outlined wholes similar to written works, even though they differ in detail. Usually this difference is apparent in the construction as well as in the arrangement of sentences. Moreover, in a lecture, concern about the immediate impact on the audience plays a preponderant role. Oral as well as written philosophic works play a large part in the process of philosophy's growth and evolution, although the influence of written works is greater in the preservation and transmission of philosophic thought, whereas oral works are more effective in the dissemination of philosophical associations, in the sphere of particular trends, etc. During particular periods of the development of philosophy notable changes also occur in the degree of influence that written or oral works exert or even in their manner of co-operation.

## VII

From each type of *change* indicated above which operates in the sphere of philosophy in the historical sense arise also specific *processes* which are bound together in a complex *process* of the *history* of philosophy. Before all, we must take into account the process of the continual coming-into-being of constantly new affirmations and conceptions and therefore the general increase of philosophy itself in the historic sense. Here we encounter various modes of evolution: tensions, relaxations, phases of decline, etc. The historic process of philosophy is of a special

kind. It unfolds in the realm of semantico-linguistic products alone and according to a narrow meaning of the word "real." Within certain limits this process is unreal, although it unfolds in time in a unique fashion; it remains a relationship of dependence upon and even of participation in real processes which take place primarily in the person of the philosophers themselves in the form of gnosiological and psycho-physiological processes. But, apart from the conditioning of philosophers by their real environment, these processes are rooted in inter-human and even in extrahuman reality: historico-political, social, economic, and cultural processes, as in customs, art, religious beliefs, and in the processes unfolding in the heart of nature which surrounds man.

In addition to the processes of growth and transformation of a given philosophy in the historic sense, one must also note the processes of birth and expansion in the literature of philosophy, written and eventually spoken. Within the great and unique process of the development of philosophy, philosophic conceptions themselves, as well as the works, constitute only kinds of stages, like phases of temporary immobilization, but at the same time products, only provisory, in the midst of which there crystallizes in some fashion, slowly, *philosophy as a certain result of historical evolution* which is never completed *in fact* and never comes to its end, containing in itself more or less numerous divergences but, despite all, always the synthetic result of conceptions and philosophic theories dominant up to a given moment, enmeshed in the process of the development of philosophy. In the history of philosophy we see not only a simple *temporal sequence* of the birth or spread of diverse philosophic conceptions but also a certain particular *logic* of the *development of the meaning* of particular conceptions, to say nothing of a logic of the development of individual philosophic movements: those of Platonism, for example, of Cartesianism in modern times, or of Kantianism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, etc.

## VIII

In the history of philosophy in its totality and from its first beginnings, we can also distinguish a purely systematic meaning—regarded as a certain ideal system of affirmations relating to philosophy in the historic sense—and a historical meaning seen as an assemblage of questions and affirmations slowly increasing with time, and which, like philosophy itself, undergoes numerous variations. There is, however, one differ-

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ence: since the object of its investigation varies itself with the particular phase of its evolution, the history of philosophy is much more engaged in the process of historic development than the philosophy which it studies. And one must likewise distinguish the history of philosophy from historico-philosophic literature. Moreover, both undergo processes of diverse variation, similar to those mentioned in connection with the development of philosophy itself.

Like the processes which are bound up with them, these two products of the mind—philosophy and the history of philosophy—do not evolve separately. On the contrary, they influence each other and are mutually interdependent whether more or less loosely and superficially, or more or less closely and profoundly, according to the periods.

Besides the history of philosophy in the strict sense of the term, there are diverse *studies* about philosophic conceptions. Such studies include manuals written not from a historical point of view but from a systematic one, serving, for example, as a point of departure for criticism or envisaged as contemplation about the various possible interpretations of existing conceptions. Although these deal with the concepts of other writers, they nonetheless stem from philosophy itself and contribute to its development in that they constitute intermediaries between the original philosophical works and the reader or between diverse philosophic tendencies.

## IX

Owing to the oft-repeated study of a single philosophic work or to the philosophic conception that is treated in it, owing also to the existence of treatises, criticisms, discussions, and to the history of philosophy, another process takes place in the realm of philosophy and philosophic literature, that is to say, the life of a certain concept or philosophic work—for example, of Kantian criticism, notably of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. One can see certain changes in the meaning of the work itself or of the philosophic conceptions. Fundamental notions and affirmations are understood differently, and the text itself is variously interpreted. There are certain shifts in regard to the importance of particular affirmations in the sphere of the conception, etc. Moreover, one notices variations as regards the *fate* of a given concept or philosophic work in the interval of different periods. For example, we witness the success and growing influence of a given work or philosophic concep-



tion during certain periods and its decline or disappearance during others. This double kind of “life” of philosophic works or conceptions helps to fortify the continuity of the process of the development of philosophy, the formation of the philosophic tradition, and of its role in the elaboration of new philosophic theories. Variations in the realm of this tradition—especially insofar as its content is concerned, or in the role that it plays during different periods—also constitute one of the processes linked to the existence and development of philosophy in the historic sense.

## X

One must distinguish the *object of study* of a certain science regarded as something *which should be examined*—the discovery and knowledge of which constitute in various respects the *duty* of one branch of human knowledge—from the *state it is in when encountered at a given moment*, which, having been furnished to the scholar, constitutes *the point of departure* for scientific investigations and becomes the source of knowledge regarding the object of study in the preceding sense.

## XI

The object of study of the history of philosophy is therefore:

A. Philosophy itself, in the historical sense—hence the content and characteristics (structural, for example) of the philosophic conceptions and theories that have actually existed in the history of philosophy.

B. The numerous processes related to the existence and development of philosophy in the historic sense, the most significant variations of which we have pointed out above.

We have a double duty in regard to this object of study, A:

1. The discovery and *reconstruction* of the *content* of philosophic conceptions. The latter are not at all a mere “copy” or repetition of philosophic affirmations or works, but neither do they consist in the pronouncement of judgments on philosophic affirmations (they are not a “metatheory”), although such judgments on affirmations and philosophic conceptions as a whole also belong to philosophy.

2. The study and exposition of the effective *characteristics* of particular philosophic conceptions and theories; for example, the problem of ascertaining whether the empiricist theory of knowledge in Locke is

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itself empirical and, in particular, whether it is an empirical psychology, as some maintain, or a theory of knowledge of an entirely different nature, etc.; or, again, questions relative to the cognitive value of the notional framework in Locke's philosophy—for instance, the “plurivosity” of his notion of “idea” and the characteristics of this notional framework, etc.

The object of study, B, involves, on the other hand, the discovery and description of numerous processes which constitute the history of philosophy (European philosophy, for example), the discovery of the causes of the evolution as it has actually taken place, the discovery of the causes of the diverse philosophic conceptions or of the effects of their appearance at a given period, etc. In short, it is *philosophy* itself, in the historic sense, as well as its *history*, that constitutes the object of study of the history of philosophy—of a well-determined philosophy such as the European, for example—whereas the objects of study given and existing already at a determined moment, beginning with which historic knowledge of philosophy starts in the sphere of philosophy, constitutes the *philosophic works* transmitted.

## XII

Do philosophic works constitute objects of investigation or rather historical sources?<sup>3</sup> The answer to this question must be twofold. They are sources, and absolutely indispensable ones, if they constitute *means of information* about the philosophic conceptions that are expressed or expounded in them and about the processes which operate in the sphere of philosophy in the course of its history, and, finally, when they serve as *means* for the reconstruction of the totality of a certain philosophic conception, which would be contained in a work given only in fragments or in a purely literary form. Conversely, they constitute, on the other hand, an object of study submitted to the history of philosophy because of their content, which is a part of philosophy itself to the extent that a given work expounds at least partially a certain, philosophic conception seized immediately in a reading, but also to the extent that the philosophic work is itself a *product* of a certain phase of the historic process constitutive of the history of philosophy, and,

3. This question was asked by Professor Tymieniecki at a reunion of the History and Philosophy Section of the Polish Academy of Sciences, after the paper given by Professor Tatarkiewicz, which was the basis for his study published in *Diogenes*, No. 20.

at the same time, a center of crystallization and therefore the *embryo* of other processes of philosophic history as well as of new historico-philosophic products—for instance, new treatises containing new philosophic conceptions, etc.

The reconstruction of the conceptions or philosophic works alone does not constitute the *history* of philosophy; it is only the taking into consideration and examination of facts in the evolution of philosophy which gives a historic character to the history of philosophy. Yet, on the other hand, to omit the reconstruction, in the elaboration of the history of philosophy, of philosophic conceptions themselves in their real aspect under which they had appeared at a given time would deprive the history of philosophy of its specific character as a special study of philosophy. To understand that the object of the study of the history of philosophy possesses this particular double character of process and at the same time of a certain product, arising in the course of history and always in evolution, is one of the indispensable conditions for taking clear cognizance of the cognitive means which the history of philosophy can employ and for being able to constitute the methods proper to its investigation.