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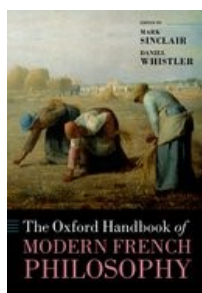
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CHAPTER

34 Philosophical Historiography in Modern French Philosophy

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Abstract

This chapter addresses major tendencies in the history of academic French historiographies of philosophy, from the establishment of history of philosophy as a university discipline in the early nineteenth century to feminist critiques of the philosophical canon in the twentieth century. Focusing on the ways in which the *philosophical* character of the history of philosophy has been conceptualized, it argues that the history of the historiography of philosophy in France is marked in two ways by the intellectual legacy of Victor Cousin. At the level of canon-formation, this history has involved continuity and reproduction of those authors and texts which Cousin regarded as central to the history of philosophy. With feminist historiographies of philosophy, the theory-constitutive function of the canon itself comes into question, thus opening a new field of inquiry as to what should be counted as properly ‘philosophical’.

Keywords: Degérando, Cousin, Boutroux, Renouvier, Bergson, Delbos, Gueroult, Alquié, Le Dœuff

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THROUGHOUT the history of philosophy, philosophers have commented on or summarized, categorized or narrated, praised or disparaged the works of their predecessors.¹ But the history of philosophy itself, as an academic discipline and field of research, is of relatively recent invention, first institutionally consolidated in France around the mid-nineteenth century. Although it has since been installed, with great success, at the heart of what it means to both teach and practise philosophy, this is largely because of the educational reforms of universities and lycées introduced by Victor Cousin under the 1830–1848 constitutional monarchy of Louis Philippe I (see Schrift, 2008: 450–451). Merging political authority with intellectual

aspiration, Cousin grounded these reforms within his own spiritualist eclectic conception of the history of philosophy (see Vermeren, 1995). The norm thereby instituted was so strong that the Spinoza scholar Pierre-François Moreau could, in 1979, still refer to its pedagogical influence, noting how Cousin had established ‘an *orthodoxy* in the way the history of ideas is taught: our teaching manuals and our choices of texts still today reproduce certain judgements, certain types of presentations and certain groupings that have their origins in his works’ (1979: 85). While it may only have been after WWI that the history of philosophy as a topic asserted itself as what Jean-Louis Fabiani has called ‘a dominant sector in the hierarchy of philosophical objects’ (1988: 84), several of those who had taught it in the pre-war period, nevertheless, also produced highly reflexive texts on their own methodological presuppositions. As Henri Bergson remarked, it was by virtue of having had to lecture repeatedly on the history of philosophy that he had been able to formulate his hypotheses as to how one might move beneath the surface meaning of a given doctrine and approximate the intuition that oriented its formation (2002: 233).

With this in mind, can something like a French tradition in the historiography of philosophy be identified? One might initially be tempted to answer negatively, since Cousin’s institutional consolidation was from the outset accompanied by several competing conceptions of the significance of the history of philosophy to philosophy as such, as well as by contestations of his meta-reflections on the technical, methodological, epistemological, and even political questions pertaining to the study of past philosophies. So, if there is a certain measure of continuity at the level of Cousin’s institutional heritage, it is matched at the theoretical level by a series of counterproposals and attempts to assert a rupture, not just from Cousin, but also importantly from Hegel. The charge brought against Hegel and Cousin, was most often that their purportedly *a priori* conceptions of the units, shape, and development of the history of philosophy were articulated at the cost of historical accuracy and disfigured the individual philosophies subsumed therein. In the service of one particular philosophical standpoint (their own), they misrepresented others.

Perhaps for this reason, the French historian and philosopher of the history of philosophy Martial Gueroult has claimed that if there is something like a distinctly French school in the historiography of philosophy, it is one held together less by shared methodological precepts or epistemological frameworks than by a joint commitment to the effort of establishing the history of philosophy as a science, its objectivity secured by the dual exigencies of historical rigour and philosophical profundity (1988: 752, 1031; see also Giolito, 1998). Following that insight, this chapter will focus on how, in a field characterized by a unicity of intent and a divergence of methodologies, the interpretation of what constituted both historical rigour and philosophical profundity has been continuously at stake. Beginning from the Franco–German exchanges that marked the institutionalization of the history of philosophy in the nineteenth century and concluding with Michèle Le Dœuff’s critique of the claims made to objectivity in writings within the history of philosophy, the chapter will interrogate what it means to write *philosophical* works in the history of philosophy.

1. The Institutionalization of the History of Philosophy in France: Cousin after Dégerando

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The institutionalization of the history of philosophy in France in the early nineteenth century took shape amidst Franco–German exchanges and rivalries. On both sides of the Rhine, multiple intellectual actors were attempting to justify the relative aptitude of either French or German philosophy to express universal truths. Histories of philosophy formed a crucial component of these endeavours, since they provided the genealogies of distinguished philosophical patrimonies, which played a substantial role in establishing claims concerning the superiority of national philosophical identities (König–Pralong, 2017, 2019; Yuva, 2020). Nevertheless, when it came to the historiography of philosophy itself, the influence of German historians upon their French colleagues is undeniable. ‘France looks to Germany’, wrote Cousin in the published edition of his 1828 lectures on the idea of a history of philosophy (1828: 28). It did so because it was in Germany that the history of philosophy had first been instituted in the mid–eighteenth century, by Johan Brucker in his *Historia critica philosophiae* (1742–1744), as a *philosophical* rather than merely erudite or literary–historical discipline.

To render the history of philosophy philosophical, methodological reform of two of its central elements was required: one relating to individual philosophies, which included the demarcation of a textual corpus and the determination of the appropriate principles of analysis–representation, and the other relating to the morphology of the history of philosophy as a whole. At both levels, the concept of the philosophical system played a crucial role. Brucker—‘the father of the history of philosophy, just as Descartes is the father of modern philosophy’ (Cousin 1828: 20)—was instrumental to how the notion of a philosophical system came to be used in the exposition of individual philosophies (Catana, 2008). In *Historia critica philosophiae* he had made a point of exorcizing the style of biographical, anecdotal, and circumstantial histories of philosophy that, on the model of Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of eminent philosophers*, had until then been most prevalent. Introducing the idea that the proper objects of histories of philosophy were ‘systems of philosophy’, Brucker instituted what could be called a ‘systematic loop’ in the historiography of philosophy. Methodologically, histories of philosophy should be oriented towards the systematic (re)presentation of doctrines, and whether a given thinker could be included within these histories came to depend upon whether this thinker had laid the grounds for, constructed, or intended the construction of a philosophical ‘system’.

This idea of a history populated by different philosophical systems was strongly present in linguist and philosopher–cum–statesman Joseph Marie Degérando’s *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie, relativement aux principes des connaissances humaines* (1804), the first French work of philosophical historiography to have as its aim both historical accuracy and philosophical relevance (Gueroult, 1988: 735). Degérando likened the task of the historian of philosophy to that of the eighteenth–century botanist who produced typological taxonomies after careful physiognomic descriptions of plants (1804: xxiv–xxv). On this analogy, Degérando’s comparative history of philosophical systems used theories of knowledge as the ‘key’—the essential criterion—according to which individual philosophies could first be reconstructed and then categorized. To achieve historical accuracy and philosophical relevance, Degérando countered what he saw as two opposed but prevalent tendencies in engagements with past philosophies: the overly interested ‘predilection [...] for a particular philosophy’ which only used past philosophy to shore up already established views, and the claim to ‘absolute impartiality’ that ‘report these opinions, not only without judging them but even without using the data given to establish any kind of result, be it theoretical or practical’ (1804: xxix–xxx; translated in Kolesnik–Antoine, 2013: 161). Degérando’s was a two–step procedure, in which an impartial historical exposition establishing each system as a ‘fact’ or ‘experience’ was followed by an informed, philosophical judgement as to the relative veracity of each. The historian could thereafter measure each individual system’s theory of knowledge against the whole typology of

different systems of philosophy: 'Once all the givens of history lay before one's gaze, one is suitably placed to ground an exact theory' (1804: xxvi).

p. 557 Degérando's promotion of epistemology to first philosophy was challenged by Cousin when he formulated his own principles for how to produce a philosophical history of the history of philosophy. In an 1822 review of Dégerando's *Histoire comparée*, Cousin remarked ↪ that a disfiguration of the historical materials and an impoverished sense of what is important within them would inevitably follow from such a decision; although philosophically interesting insights regarding theories of knowledge might be produced in this manner, the historical commitment to the 'reproduction of systems such as they really were' could not be made good through Degérando's approach. Consequently, the physiognomy of this history as a whole would be left 'completely distorted' (1825: 437) and severely restricted.

Despite the severity of this critique, Cousin's historiographical method was, at its core, a modulation of the eclectic operation Degérando had proposed to determine the fundamental principles of knowledge (see Antoine-Mahut, 2019). 'Eclecticism', as the art of discerning the true in different systems and granting it 'its place in the great city of philosophy [...] is the muse that must preside over a truly philosophical history of philosophy' (Cousin, 1863 [1829]: 34–35). But to allow eclecticism to do justice to both philosophy and its history, Cousin believed the eclectic operation had to be applied more expansively. Although he reproduced Brucker's and Degérando's assumption that the history of philosophy is the history of philosophical systems, Cousin sought to ground the unity of this history in 'psychology', in the study of all the faculties of the human mind as given in 'interior experience' (Cousin, 1833: 12). Philosophy, for Cousin, was born from reflection on 'natural consciousness', and he understood the multiplicity of past philosophical systems as partially true insofar as they all arose from and uncovered different aspects of this consciousness. Based on a theory of the lawfulness of philosophical reflection itself, Cousin reduced this multiplicity to four ideal types—sensualism, idealism, scepticism, and mysticism—that necessarily followed upon each other in a repeated loop of increasing complexity. Cousin's history of philosophy is therefore not so much an account of the contingent emergence of past philosophies as it is a tableau of the ensemble of all possible philosophies, what Lucie Rey has called a 'de-historicizing history of philosophy' (2012: 448).

The supposed partial truth of past philosophical systems left the historian-philosopher with a twofold task of de- and re-composition: all the historian's virtues of erudition were required to tease out the truth within each system, insofar as it reflected manifest laws of human consciousness, and then the philosopher, 'by reuniting all the incomplete systems, would provide a complete philosophy, adequate to the totality of consciousness' (1833: 48). The true error of past philosophical systems was therefore to have laid claim to truth absolutely: 'each system is not false but incomplete' (1833: 48).

Spiritualist eclecticism was, thus, not only supposed to finally arrive at a true philosophy, it was supposed to do so without denying the truth of past philosophies. Even where past philosophies had been formulated in express opposition to others, Cousin considered a synthesis possible. In philosophy as in politics, he saw himself as a peace broker offering a strategy of compromise between warring parties: just as representative government can be seen as a compromise between democracy and absolute monarchy, the eclectic system was the compromise between multiple and often mutually contradictory philosophical systems (see Whistler, 2018). Conversely, the truth of spiritualism was to be demonstrated from a careful assessment of the entirety of the recomposed history of philosophy. Cousin's eclectic system aimed at 'the reform of philosophical studies in France, by illuminating the history of philosophy within a system, and by demonstrating this system through the entirety of the history of philosophy' (Cousin, 1833: 48).

p. 558 Cousin's categorizations, periodizations, and canonizations continued to exert their influence on the historiography of philosophy long after him due to the educational reforms ↪ he implemented in the mid-nineteenth century. But even though some of his immediate students and followers sought to develop the idea of an eclectic system while departing from his precise formulation of it (e.g. Janet, 1885), most soon

came to agree with the derisory verdict cast over Cousin's œuvre by Félix Ravaisson in his *La Philosophie en France au xix^e siècle*. Noting that Cousin seemed more disposed to pointing out errors than to collecting truths and that the eclectic spiritualist synthesis remained marred by a vagueness as to the metaphysical commitments of a psychological method based on facts of consciousness, Ravaisson concluded that 'Victor Cousin's proposal to select what is most true and the best in each philosophy was never actually realised' (2023: 32).

2. Contesting Cousin: Renouvier and Boutroux

As the study of philosophy was increasingly associated with the study of its history, critiques of Cousin's own conceptualization of this history proliferated. The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of influential alternatives to his historiographical approach. It might even be said that Cousin's institutional success in soldering philosophy and history of philosophy became an important factor in the downfall of spiritualist eclecticism. Crucial in this regard were various strains of French neo-Kantianism, since distinct appropriations of an at least nominally Kantian conception of practical freedom stood at the heart of attempts to counter what quickly came to be regarded as the overly reductionist framework of Cousin's eclectic philosophy and Hegel's encyclopaedic system (see Capeillères, 1998; Luft and Capeillères, 2010: 70–77). Among the most significant figures in this terrain were Charles Renouvier, who never held an official teaching position but published prolifically, and Émile Boutroux, who followed the current of Ravaisson's and Jules Lachelier's 'new spiritualism' and occupied coveted positions at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Sorbonne.

In *Esquisse d'une classification systématique des doctrines philosophique* (1885), Renouvier contested the conciliatory ends of Cousin's system of classification. This 'sketch' was less preoccupied with the proper methodology for writing a narrative *history* of philosophy than with the classificatory criteria for the multiple systems offered within it (Mélès, 2016: 179–180). Of past philosophies it offered a systematic classification intended to counter both Hegelian and Cousinian attempts to subsume the whole of the philosophical past within a single system. This subsumption attempted to resolve the contradictory and conflictual character of the history of philosophy in order to safeguard its unity, but Renouvier instead affirmed this conflictual character and sought to render it intelligible.

Grounded in an affirmation of the principle of non-contradiction and of the law of the excluded middle, the conflictual character could, for Renouvier, be comprehended from the standpoint of two series of fundamentally antinomic solutions to six eternal and radical dilemmas of reason:

- i. the dilemma of first causes which generates a split between doctrines of the thing and doctrines of the idea (1885: 1.3–4);
- ii. the dilemma of either a first and absolute beginning of all things or of infinite existence (1885: 1.28);
- iii. the dilemma of a gradual evolution of the world or of creation *ex nihilo* (1885: 1.101);
- iv. the dilemma of (moral) determination or freedom (1885: 1.227);
- v. the dilemma of first principles of pure morality which generates a split between doctrines of happiness and doctrines of duty (1885: 1.296);
- vi. the dilemma between philosophies constructed from necessary and evident first principles and philosophies constructed from practical postulates of reason, freely chosen beliefs on the grounds of practical exigencies (1885: 2.1–2).

Insofar as these dilemmas revolved around eternal philosophical problems, Renouvier's history of philosophy exhibited an affinity with other neo-Kantian 'problem-oriented' formulations of disjunctive questions (see Catana, 2013). The chronological emergence of different philosophies from this perspective represents an ever-increased precision in the determination of these fundamental antinomies of philosophical thought. Against Cousin's method of compromise and Hegel's subsumptive approach, Renouvier argued that:

If the history of philosophy [...] has [...] been nothing but the progressive expression and clarification of a constant and irreducible opposition of *sic* or *non* answers to questions that are of sovereign interest to thought, questions which indeed logically demand either affirmation or negation—each to the exclusion of the other—and if, as I insist, these affirmations and negations are taken to be valid in themselves and as enunciations of truths or errors, if in other words the principle of contradiction is true, then what philosophical doctrines demand is classification in the proper sense of the word. Such a classification must be made dichotomously, according to the most important of the opposed irreconcilables. These should in turn also be grouped amongst themselves, as far as possible, on two opposite sides, according to the affinities that experience or reasoning detect among them.

(1885: 128)

The opposition of 'thing' and 'idea' (expressed, for instance, in the opposition between materialist physicalists and Platonic idealism, according to Renouvier) was perhaps the first articulated dilemma of reason, but, for Renouvier, the antinomic structure begins from the idea that philosophy starts from a freely chosen belief without evidence or justification. He reduces the history of philosophy as a 'whole' to two mutually exclusive systems: the system of the thing (uniting terms such as 'infinity', 'evolution', 'necessity', 'happiness', 'necessary' and 'evident reasons') and the system of consciousness (uniting terms such as 'idea', 'finitude', 'creation', 'freedom', 'duty', 'belief'). Since there are no *theoretical* grounds for opting for either of these two systems, Renouvier emphasized the *practical* and *moral* reasons for choosing one over the other. His classificatory system thus becomes more of a tribunal than a sorting machine (Gueroult, 1988: 793), and the result was a theoretical decisionism guided by practical reason.

A different methodological departure from Cousin's eclectic system is offered by Boutroux's careful expositions of past philosophies. His importance to the shift towards rigorous reconstruction was what caused Léon Brunschvicg, in a 1922 eulogy, to honour Boutroux for having been 'the renovator of studies in the history of philosophy' in France (1922: 266). This renovation followed the historiographical principles that Boutroux presented in his translator's introduction to the 1877 French edition of Eduard Zeller's *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (1856–1868).

p. 560 Here Boutroux's approach to the history of philosophy is predicated on a rejection of any predetermined schema of development placed onto the history of philosophy as a whole (1877: xv–xxvii). Although he did not preclude questions concerning the broader lineages of the history of philosophy, they were subordinated to the study of individual philosophies, which, for Boutroux, meant the study of systematic wholes. 'A philosophy' properly speaking was

any collection of ideas set forth by the philosopher as forming a systematic whole. Where this condition is not fulfilled, we may indeed be dealing with a shrewd moralist or a profound, original thinker, but certainly we are not dealing with a philosopher [...] The spring and origin of the history of philosophy can be found only in the monuments left by philosophers themselves.

(Boutroux 1912 [1897]: 4, 6)

This definition of the object of history of philosophy, which still excludes those thinkers who did not compose systems, dominated the next generations of philosophical historians. Henceforth, historians of philosophy diverged not in relation to social or political contexts or to the place of philosophy amongst the sciences, but to what, within a given 'monument', made it philosophical. The question of the historian's task therefore concerned what was to be brought out of these great systematic wholes for the history itself to be philosophical. In this regard, the specificity of Boutroux's historiographical prescriptions derives from his emphasis upon the at once intensely personal and universal aspects of philosophy: if passions, morality, and aesthetic drives are as integral to philosophy as theoretical and scientific concerns, practical as well as theoretical reason must be accounted for. Two primary consequences can be drawn from this assertion: first, a system cannot be reduced to its historical context, because such a reduction would miss the freedom and contingency of its fundamental philosophical gesture, namely the surpassing of such conditions in an effort to articulate the universal; second, that a strictly logical or formal exposition of the coherence of connections between concepts also falls short of portraying this surpassing, since it ultimately produces a sterile image of what is fundamentally a *living* thought. The systematic form, technical terminology, concepts and their connections are but the clothes a thought assumes, the outward dress of a free and creative act. The historian of philosophy must, in Boutroux's words, engender a profound affective sympathy with their object, since the peculiar objectivity of past philosophical doctrines derives from the manner in which subjectivity has been bestowed upon or invested within them by their authors. The historian must follow the author

along the winding by-paths of meditation, sharing in his emotions as a philosopher, and, along with him, enjoying that harmony wherein his intelligence has found repose. Systems of philosophy are living thoughts. It is by seeking in the written word for the means of reviving these thoughts within ourselves that we may hope to hear them deliver their message.

(Boutroux, 1912: 7)

Focused on the life of philosophical works, Boutroux would ultimately refuse the pertinency of the problem of contradictory truths in the history of philosophy. As living wholes, they remain infinitely generative for thought: 'Great doctrines', he writes, 'have a principle of life within them. Life cannot be refuted: it is communicated, transformed or extinguished according to its own proper laws' (1905: 53).

3. The Historian-Philosophers: Delbos and Bergson

If, in Émil Bréhier's words, Renouvier was concerned with 'philosophy and not with philosophers' (1963: 26), the turn of the twentieth century was the moment where this tendency was decidedly reversed, and, following Boutroux, the specificity of different manners of making claims to universality came to form the privileged object of investigation for historians of philosophy. The cluster of thinkers who pursued this project, whom Maurice Merleau-Ponty would baptize the 'historian-philosophers' (2005: 1350), were highly academic and deeply embedded within the professorial class. They shared not only educational- and career-trajectories, but also the perennialist assumption that there is something within every great philosophy that somehow endures indefinitely. Conventional history of philosophy thus became a discipline of textual exegesis aimed at discerning and explicating the operations according to which different past philosophies had sought to express or attain a truth that transcended the historical conditions of their articulation (see Chimisso, 2008: 53–54; Giolito, 1998: 26). As Léon Robin put it, the history of philosophy was 'not palaeontology', not a historical science whose object was dead and gone, but one whose object still spoke to the present (1936: 107). Since philosophical works were taken to transcend their context of articulation, they are 'alive' to contemporary philosophy, which indeed remained interested in these works precisely on account of what they had to offer *philosophically*. Despite the emphasis placed on historical authenticity and accuracy by historians of philosophy, their declensions of the dual exigencies of historical rigour and philosophical profundity therefore ultimately subsumed historical to philosophical concerns.

Against this background, the period leading up to WWII saw several important historiographical debates, among them the famous series of interventions and exchanges between Bréhier, Étienne Gilson, Maurice Blondel, and several others on the appropriateness and legitimacy of the concept of 'Christian philosophy' and whether it might be applied to Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustin, Duns Scotus, and other medieval Christian thinkers. Herein, the old dispute between faith and reason—in particular, between Christian revelation and philosophical truth—influenced conceptions of the relationships between Christian thought and the history of philosophical systems (see Bréhier, 1931; Blondel, 1932; Gilson, 1936).

A different and slightly earlier methodological rift has even richer significance for understanding French historiography of philosophy. This rift can be discerned in the competing claims of Victor Delbos, a Kant and Spinoza scholar, and Henri Bergson to an anti-Hegelian and anti-Cousinian conception of the history of philosophy and of conceptual creativity within individual philosophical works. Bergson and Delbos had both worked under Boutroux and the vitalist philosopher Léon Ollé-Laprune, and they would both, in the nationalist context of WWI, go on to attempt a philosophically grounded characterization of what constitutes 'French' philosophy (Worms, 2009: 173–193).

In the early twentieth century, Delbos dedicated three posthumously published lectures to the object of the history of philosophy. Proceeding from a critical review of past approaches that all had failed to live up to Delbos' standards of rigour, these lectures constitute a methodological manifesto for an anti-a priori philosophical approach to the history of philosophy. In continuity with Boutroux, to whom he referred as 'his master' (1905: iii), Delbos ↵ noted that the main problem with a priori conceptions of the history of philosophy is that they disfigure the past philosophies they encounter, misshaping them by measuring them against the historians' images of what philosophy essentially is. The 'ideal system' is not thereby discerned from a true analysis of the historical material but in accord with a preconceived idea of what this system *should* look like. This is, in Delbos' view, a historical misrepresentation; it might play a role in a philosophical argument but could not make claims to being a truthful representation of its intended object.

In contrast, Delbos proposed a three-step procedure, comprising, first, a source-critical approach to the materials constituting a philosopher's archive which aimed to determine the authenticity of works attributed to the author in question; second, a terminologically and philologically oriented study of the

technical vocabulary of the author; and third, a determination of the internal systematicity of the doctrine in question. What the historian must seek to recover is the synthetic power of the author, the creativity required to construct a reasoned series of propositions. Only thus could a historian hope to reconstitute a doctrine as it really had been. Drawing on his work on Spinoza, Delbos argued against the idea that the full scope of a given doctrine was virtually inherent in the ‘influences’ or component parts out of which it was constructed:

[W]hat we seek, as much as possible, is the doctrine of a philosopher such as he himself conceived of it. [...] To be sure, if a philosophical doctrine was nothing but the steady development of a few initial conceptions in which that philosophy would be logically preformed, a method of abstract reconstruction might suffice. But the truth is that in all philosophy, especially in all great philosophy, what is somewhat schematically called the logical agreement and subordination of the parts, the logical relation of the premises to the consequences, is far from having been something that was posed virtually, in advance. Rather, it has been a discovery or an invention. The definitions and general theses that open the *Ethics* may be entrusted to our logical acumen, but it is more than probable that, without reading the *Ethics* itself, we would not be able to derive from them a conception of the soul as an idea of the body, nor the reduction of human affects to the tendency to persevere in being in the final doctrine of emancipation and beatitude. Simply because a great mind found the mediating conceptions that allow for relations between ideas that initially were more or less distant from each other, it does not follow that this organisation of ideas was self-evident: it is because this organisation exists that it is now held to be natural. Before it existed, it had to be created.

(1917b: 374–375)

A historically faithful and a philosophically profound reading of a given work must focus above all on its internal organization, its particular manner of establishing a unitary structure. Sharply opposing the notion of a possible split between the spirit and the letter of a given work, Delbos had already, in the methodologically oriented preface to *Le Problème moral la philosophie de Spinoza et dans l’histoire du spinozisme*, proposed that true originality springs from the synthesizing operation an author performs in the construction of an organized whole: ‘the internal force of a doctrine, is measured by the degree of organization it implies’ (1893: vi). Nothing beyond or outside the text can provide a measure of its argumentative force and therefore of its philosophical qualities. What can, however, allow us to cast judgements on particular philosophies, and indeed what gives philosophy a history proper, is the extent to which this particular mode of organization is able to retain an identity throughout a history of interpretations and appropriations. In this manner, Delbos had a twofold approach to the philosophical evaluation of doctrines: their ‘force’ and their ‘influence’, their degree of internal organization and their capacity to retain a degree of self-identity even as they are scattered and taken up in later commentaries, interpretations, and distortions (see Lærke, 2020: 658–659).

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It is often remarked that Bergson, over the course of his long career, developed two different and even divergent conceptions of the history of philosophy (see Chimisso, 2008: 51; Gueroult, 1988: 840–841). The first, present in the concluding chapter of *L’évolution créatrice* (1907), provided a ‘glance at the history of systems’ from the standpoint of a *reform* in philosophy. On this view, the history of philosophy appears as a series of mutually imbricated errors. It was, we might say, a diagnostic history of two ‘theoretical illusions’ perpetuated within all past philosophies, leading up to the institution of Bergson’s own realization of the true nature of philosophy as a science of life methodologically grounded in intuition (1998: 296). The second, discussed in greater detail below, is encapsulated in one of the most widely known French texts on historiographical methods in philosophy: the 1911 essay ‘L’intuition philosophique’.

Delivered six years prior to the posthumous publication of Delbos' reflections, Bergson's 'Philosophical Intuition' shares a number of Delbos' initial assumptions, including his view that use of philological and historically contextual tools initially helps us to situate a given work and decipher its component parts. But whereas Delbos emphasized that originality springs from a power of synthesis which itself remains immanent to the expressive signs of which a text is composed, Bergson diverges from this by way of an idea of intuition as an ultimately ineffable element within the philosophical text.

Philosophy springs, so Bergson would argue, from the deeply personal intuition of the philosopher. Whereas Delbos had emphasized the text-immanent analysis of composition and synthesis, Bergson sought out a reference beyond the text, in the intuition which guided its construction. It may be that to communicate and not simply silently commune with this intuition, the philosopher needs language, concepts, and images to give it its shape. These linguistic constructs are, however, only the external forms that at once lodged an intuition within the text *and*, inevitably, distorts it. The historian of philosophy, when trying to get at the 'infinitely simple' yet inexpressible core of a philosophy, can do nothing better than produce an 'intermediary image' that achieves a reasonable balance between the original intuition in all its simplicity and the complexity of the linguistic and formal traits through which the author has presented that intuitive apprehension (Bergson, 2002: 234). To articulate such an image, a deep familiarity with the architectonic composition of the works in question is needed, as is a sense of the 'synthesis' of component parts. But what Bergson emphasizes is that while it is indispensable to draw up a philosophical-historical inventory and, so to speak, produce a historical cartography of a text, this leaves us with an essentially *external* view of what the *essence* of a given philosophy is. It misses out on what is *original* in the philosophical system.

A philosopher worthy of the name has never said more than a single thing: and even then it is something he has tried to say, rather than actually said. And he has said only one thing because he has seen only one point: and at that it was not so much a vision as a contact: this contact has furnished an impulse, this impulse a movement, and if this movement, which is as it were a kind of swirling of dust taking a particular form, becomes visible to our eyes only through what it has collected along its way, it is no less true that other bits of dust might as well have been raised and that it would still have been the same whirlwind. Thus a thought which brings something new into the world is of course obliged to manifest itself through the ready-made ideas it comes across and draws into its movement; it seems thus, as it were, relative to the epoch in which the philosopher lived; but that is frequently merely an appearance. The philosopher might have come several centuries earlier; he would have had to deal with another philosophy and another science; he would have given himself other problems; he would have expressed himself by other formulas; not one chapter perhaps of the books he wrote would have been what it is; and nevertheless he would have said the same thing.

(2002: 236)

The intuition sets to work an impulse, a movement, and an order of relations whose identity entails that, even if the conceptual content of the theses might change, the philosophy itself remains the same, the eternal core that makes it *this* philosophy no matter when it was articulated. That is, a certain *pattern* or *schema* remains the same, can be represented, and is central for pinpointing what is 'new' in the philosophy. Whether the philosopher had established this image himself is not of central concern, for as interpreters there is no way around trying to identify those schemas that are essential if the intuition is to be realized. What Bergson describes is a bind whereby only the intuition which is articulated is fully philosophical, but the manner and medium of such an articulation also inevitably causes a misrecognition of its philosophical character (2002: 240). The historian of philosophy is a translator of something that is constitutionally

untranslatable and whose meaning can only be approximated. The historian is, in other words, an interpreter of the ineffable.

4. Gueroult: The History of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem

The methodological rift between immanent and transcendent approaches to philosophical texts only deepened in the inter- and post-war period, as it came to be articulated in the rationalist and phenomenological approaches to the history of philosophy advocated respectively by Gueroult and Ferdinand Alquié. Although these institutionally powerful professors were both adamant that the history of philosophy needs to be *philosophical*, their idea of what lies behind such a predicate was divergent enough that a methodological ‘quarrel’ could be staged on the occasion of their respective readings of Descartes and Spinoza (see Peden, 2014).

Alquié, the younger of the two, maintained that what ‘psychological’, ‘mathematical’, and ‘historical’ methods had in common was that they make ‘an object out of philosophical truth’ (2010 [1956]: 52), to the detriment of any sense of the original encounter both with truth and the ‘affective’ dimension of philosophical experience (Alquié 1953: 105). To avoid doing so, Alquié proposed that a sense of the *démarche* and experiences which had engendered the act of philosophizing in the first place was required, an understanding of how each philosophy was at once, as Boutroux had also noted, universal and highly personal in its articulation. What the historian searches for is the ‘subjective universality’ that must, in one sense or another, be re-enacted (Alquié 2010: 26). For Alquié, one ‘cannot understand a philosopher without becoming one’, without a deeply personal experience of what it means to retrieve ‘that eternity which belongs to Philosophy’ (2010: 91). To the extent that this approach to the history of philosophy made the work both of writing and interpreting philosophy dependent on an ineffable experience of truth, Alquié’s methodological texts align with Bergson’s text-transcendent approach to the history of philosophy.

p. 565 Among the two generations of ‘historian-philosophers’, the most influential characters among them, including Bréhier, Gilson, and Gouhier, wrote historiographical meta-reflections on the specificity of the history of philosophy as a historical discipline, on the relation of philosophy to its past, and on the problem of the unity of philosophy as such, and this against the background of the often mutually contradictory diversity of philosophies. Few, however, probed ‘the history of philosophy as a philosophical problem’ (Gueroult, 1969) to the extent that Gueroult did. This ‘philosophical problem’ was, in short, the old one of how the historicity of philosophy (which to Gueroult meant that different philosophies contained intertextual references, conflicted with and contradicted one another) was to be reconciled with the philosophical truth of all philosophy (1969: 564). Gueroult addressed this issue in a broad range of articles and presentations, some of which were included in the posthumously published *Dianoematic*, a peculiar exercise in historical transcendental philosophy that, within a history of the history of philosophy, sought to provide ‘the conditions for the possibility of philosophies (*dianoema* = doctrine) being objects of a possible history’ (1979: 41).

Following Delbos, Gueroult emphasized both that philosophy is a ‘necessary sequence of notions’ with ‘the character of unity and rational interiority’ and that this does not exclude a plurality of ways, or techniques, for producing these necessary sequences (1969: 70). For Gueroult, history of philosophy was the history of different techniques of instituting the ‘philosophical monuments’ that populate it. While insisting that philosophy, unlike many other disciplines, needs a *philosophical* history,² Gueroult demarcated his own research programme through a definition of what is ‘essentially philosophical’ in this history and, just as importantly, where it is to be located. As he explained in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, his concern was neither with Bergsonian creative subjectivity nor the transhistorical logic of abstract concepts ‘beyond’ their individualized and concrete instantiation that Gilson, Gueroult’s predecessor at the Collège,

had privileged. In distinct ways, the focus on philosophical intuition and the attempt to situate works within an abstract field of possible philosophical positions infringed upon the irreducibility of the philosophical work, replacing historical work with either an ideal system or an ineffable intuition. What he proposed instead was a historiography of philosophy based on a 'positive method' that grounds the possibility of any systematic overview of the history of philosophy on a preliminary and indispensable study of the specific 'probationary techniques' through which each individual 'oeuvre' or 'philosophical monument' constructs its own reality and forces the reader to follow this construction (1952: 13).³ To Gueroult, the peculiar task of the historian of philosophy was therefore to write a history of something whose aim is to rid itself of what is historical within it. At the heart of the opposition, located in the space between history and philosophy, is the notion that the two disciplines operate according to two radically heterogeneous orders of truth:

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The first we would define as the exact and authentic reconstitution of a fact or a group of facts, and these facts would be doctrines. The second we would define as a doctrine supplying the internal explanation of things [...] Whether it is a question of dogmatism or scepticism, of philosophy of knowledge or philosophy of life, philosophical truth always appears as containing a doctrinal object with a universal and timeless character, beyond the bounds of any past time or history. Of course, historical truth as truth is also universally and eternally valid. But its object is in the past and in time, not at all, as is the case with philosophical truth, a conception posed outside of time.

(Gueroult, 1952: 3)

The specificity of Gueroult's historiographical intervention therefore derives from the manner in which he maintains this fundamental distinction between historical and philosophical truth, while equally holding that philosophy and *its* history cannot, either by fact or by right, be wholly disentangled. Among a number of reasons given for this inseparability, the most significant is that philosophy does not consist in a body of established truths: there is no set of truths to which a scientific community can assent. What there is, in Gueroult's view, is a *plurality* of mutually exclusive conceptual constructs that each lay claim to an 'eternal, universally valid and definitively established truth' (1952: 5). Since there is no progression in the history of philosophy, 'past' philosophies cannot meaningfully be said to be 'in the past'. In philosophy,

truths as objects of science and truths as objects of history are to be found on the same level, scientific interest and historical interest endlessly tangling with one another and tearing one another apart. Thus, the historian of philosophy can never stop being a philosopher as the doctrines of another time are not discarded in a past that has been left behind by the presence of a constituted body of established truths: they persist before him in an eternal present, as a collection of philosophical knowledge, latent and possible, offered up to meditation, from which the philosopher may endlessly draw inspiration.

(1952: 5)

On this view, the historian of philosophy is torn between two standpoints—the historical and the philosophical—which provide two distinct perspectives on their materials and which require different scientific virtues: the external and contextualizing view of the historian which is always at risk of reducing philosophical objects to a sociological or psychological explanation on the one hand and the internalist view of the philosopher. Ultimately, the closest Gueroult comes to resolving this tension in his inaugural lecture is when he asserts that, in order for the historically motivated demand for exactitude to be fulfilled, the 'historian' of philosophy must work under the tutelage of the 'philosopher': 'If one wants to know exactly what the philosopher wanted to say, one needs to know exactly how he believed he could establish this' (1952: 13). It is in this light that the idea of a 'technology' of philosophical systems is established. The *aims* of philosophical monuments are fundamentally demonstrative: they seek to persuade the reader of their truth. There is of course a specific architectural aspect to philosophical systems which can be contemplated

by the historian of philosophy, but the crucial aspect resides, as has been discussed, not in the finished architectural structure, but in the techniques through which this whole was effectuated in the first place. For this reason, the historian of philosophy must also be a ‘technologist’ of philosophical systems who can re-enact the institutive techniques through which the proof of the truth of a given *oeuvre* is demonstrated. The task of the historian of philosophy consists in ‘revealing, for every system, a superior intelligible reality, in creating a communion with it, in making it possible to penetrate into the very depths of its vast and multiple perspectives’ (1952: 6).

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Both Gueroult and Alquié’s influence upon later generations of French philosophers was substantial. Ginette Dreyfus and Victor Goldschmidt explored the parameters of Gueroult’s ‘structural method’ for readings in history of philosophy, while Jules Vuillemin, a ‘heterodox disciple’, would take this method in the direction of a classification of philosophical systems (Mélès, 2020; Vuillemin, 1986). Alquié’s approach reverberated in the works of phenomenologists such as Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion (Peden, 2014: 366). Finally, the distinctly ‘decentered’ readings that Deleuze developed (Smith, 2012), in which the writings of Hume, Nietzsche, Bergson, Kant, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Foucault were used as the sites for conceptually generative readings in the history of philosophy, can be understood as a negotiation of insights from both Alquié and Gueroult (Bianco, 2016).

5. Le Dœuff: The Philosophical Imaginary

The idea that the history of philosophy should also be philosophical was carried over into feminist critiques of this history, though crucially it here came to be paired with an interrogation of what constitutes the borders of the philosophical and of how these borders have been policed, institutionally and in meta-philosophical discourses. Of course, critical perspectives cast on the history of philosophy from the standpoint of political commitments to feminism came in many shapes and forms. Some of these tended to regard philosophy as an essentially masculinist endeavour and, like Luce Irigaray in *Speculum de l’autre femme* [*Speculum of the Other Woman*] (1974), understood the history of philosophy in analogy to Martin Heidegger’s notion of the history of Western metaphysics as a history of the forgetting of being, namely as the history of the forgetting of sexual difference (see Colebrook, 1997).

In a more direct commitment to philosophy as a discipline, Le Dœuff’s *Recherches sur l’imaginaire philosophique* [*The Philosophical Imaginary*] focused on the central but often overlooked role of images, metaphors, tropes, and allegories within philosophical works. Le Dœuff’s advocacy for a shift to a study of the work of images in texts, in some respects indebted to Bachelard’s critical epistemology, was accompanied by a critique of the tendency in academic philosophy to disavow the import of iconography in the history of philosophy. In this sense, it constituted an intervention into the historiography of philosophy that called into question the sovereignty of discursive rationality; ‘the rational, the concept, the argued, the logical’. ‘[E]xisting histories of philosophy’, Le Dœuff wrote, ‘are at the very least incomplete, not to say mutilating, in that they never present us with an individual philosopher’s image-album’ (1989 [1980]: 1–2). This was still a call for a philosophical historiography of philosophy, since it was argued that previous disavowals of the image in philosophy, to the extent that they were dogmatic and simply rested on authority, were in one sense profoundly *unphilosophical* in their unwillingness to carry through an interrogation of the presuppositions of their own discourse. To counter such a disavowal of images, Le Dœuff argued that they might play an essential role in the work of thinking, one that cannot be grasped properly if they are regarded as merely decorative ornaments or pedagogical aids, nor as mythological remnants. In the properly philosophical development of ideas, imagery embeds a world of experience in the text; a world that is essential both for the way philosophical problems are formulated and answered. In this sense, Le Dœuff’s concept of the philosophical imaginary was not confined to an imaginary in philosophy but considers an imaginary belonging to a specific and privileged social minority of (primarily) male

p. 568 philosophers. It is the imaginary of a learned public, that through the discipline of the concept breaks with other imaginaries and, as a cultural product (produced and reproduced), is transmitted across different periods.

In particular, Le Dœuff emphasized the moments when metaphorical language slides into a biased division between knowing male subjects and female objects of knowledge. Her analyses of misogyny and of the connections between masculinity and reason in the history of philosophy—as when Francis Bacon could suggest that nature is a woman and that true knowledge treats her as his wife, while false knowledge relates to her as a barren whore—was intended to elucidate how deeply integrated gendered exclusions have been (and often still are) within the language and institutions of philosophy. Crucially, when Le Dœuff questioned the legitimacy of the gendered imaginary of philosophy, it was neither to reject philosophy nor reason, but to confront them both with their own unthought and thus open the way for a more pluralistic approach to what are considered important philosophical problems.

6. Conclusion: Current Perspectives

The actuality of the problems pertinent to the historiography of philosophy derives in no small part from current challenges to the constitution of the canon as predominantly male and almost exclusively European (see Ambrogio, 2020; Hutton, 2019; Park, 2014). These challenges currently take the form of questioning the boundaries of what has traditionally been recognized as philosophical work and broadening conceptions of what qualifies as philosophical questions and genres of writing, so as to pluralize the canon. To interrogate the historiography of philosophy as a critical exercise means to denaturalize the history of philosophy by showing that the categories that typically order this history, the geography that typically subtends it, and the figures that typically populate it did not come into this world fully constituted or as natural givens. They are the products of the continued tellings and retellings, oriented around certain specific conceptions of this history that could indeed be told otherwise. Perhaps for this reason, the pluralistic approach to both philosophy and the history of philosophy heralded by Le Dœuff and others has continued to proliferate. It has done so in a reflexive turn within the historiography of philosophy, one that has been less preoccupied with providing answers to the question of the legitimacy of the history of philosophy as a discipline than with explorations of what can be gained if the field of this history is broadened: no longer simply preoccupied with systems, historians of philosophy have instead foregrounded the fecundity of traditions, concepts and their (mis)translations, intellectual environments, ‘moments’, ‘conjectures’, and ‘controversies’. Some such studies have been explicitly ‘external’ to philosophy as a discipline, taking the history (and historiography) of philosophy as its object (see König-Pralong, 2018; Bianco, 2015; Fabiani, 1988). Others have sought a balance between context and text, attempting either to write from within conjunctures or ‘moments’ or, through a focus on controversies, to allow for the tensions immanent to an intellectual field to be elucidated (see Macherey, 2019; Maniglier, 2011; Worms, 2009). For all their differences, what is recognized in these approaches is the inescapability of what Christophe Giolito has called the ‘definitional bind’ that the history of philosophy has continuously had to negotiate (1998: 31). That is, either one pre-determines the nature of philosophy itself only very vaguely, such that a multiplicity of different philosophies can be allowed for, or one provides a definition of philosophy as such—a determination of the formal and essential identity between different philosophies—in which case there will surely be doctrines, thinkers, genres, debates, problems, concepts, and perspectives that fail to live up to this criterion and which will therefore be excluded from this history.

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Notes

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- 2 In contrast, the history of mathematics does not need to be *mathematical*.
- 3 Translations of Gueroult's inaugural lecture are taken from a forthcoming translation by Jack Cox.