

Gadamer's Logic of Question and Answer  
and the Difference Between the History of Philosophy and the History of Ideas

David Vessey

**DRAFT**

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Hans-Georg Gadamer is well known for his claim that when we properly read texts we engage in dialogue with those texts. He acknowledges the obvious point that dialogues with texts are different from dialogues with other persons, but interpreting texts still warrants being called a dialogue for two reasons: 1. In both cases to understand requires to understanding how the text or the interlocutor could be insightful, and 2. In both cases we are confronted with questions. These two criteria for an encounter to be dialogical are connected to his broader understanding of language—in a talk given in his 90s, Gadamer commented about dialogue that his “contribution to this theme in the realm of philosophy has been to stress the fact that language is only properly itself when it is dialogue, where question and answer, answer and question are exchanged with one another”<sup>1</sup>—however in the context of thinking about what it means to do the history of philosophy well, two surprising conclusions follow. First, we can’t understand a philosophical text without understanding how it can be a bearer of insights for us.<sup>2</sup> Second, we can’t understand a text without engaging its claims. Together they mean that all understanding requires some evaluation of the insights of the philosopher’s claims, independent of the justifications the

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<sup>1</sup> “Treatment and Dialogue” in *The Enigma of Health* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 127-128

<sup>2</sup> Gadamer will say we can’t read a text without asking how the text can be true, though this way of putting it can be misleading. Gadamer is working with a phenomenological conception of truth as alethic, as disclosive of insights, not with a conception of truth as correspondence, or even as restricted to propositions. To avoid confusions I will speak in terms of texts being bearers of insight.

author provided. There can be no disengaged interpretations; nor can interpretation be separated from critical evaluations.

Moreover, Gadamer's argument that "we can understand a text only when we have understood the question to which it is an answer"<sup>3</sup> cuts across the standard ways of classifying different approaches to the history of philosophy—"historicist" vs. "analytic," "antiquarian" vs. "presentist," "historical reconstruction" vs. "rational reconstruction," or "de dicto vs. de re" interpretations. It provides us with new and plausible answers to four central debates in the history of philosophy: (1) in what ways does the history of philosophy inform contemporary philosophizing?; (2) in what way is the historical context relevant for properly interpreting a philosopher's views?; (3) in what way must philosophers be charitable in their interpretation of a text?; (4) in what way does the history of philosophy differ from intellectual history? Since I am presenting Gadamer's views against the background of the current debates over the nature of the history of philosophy, I will begin with that context.

### **The lay of the land**

Even the most historically steeped philosophers working in the history of philosophy think their work is relevant, directly or indirectly, to contemporary philosophical debates. That by itself is enough to distinguish philosophers working in the history of philosophy from intellectual historians. Presentism can take many forms; one prominent version is that the relevance of an historical inquiry is tied to its relevance for contemporary issues. Perhaps a historian thinks the U.S. is in decline and there are parallels between the decline of the U.S. and the decline of Rome. That historian writes a book about the decline of Rome, the point of which

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<sup>3</sup> *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 363.

is to show the likely path to ruin of the United States--perhaps to suggest a way to forestall it. That's would be one version of presentism. Historians will agree that such as book is bound to be a poor work of historical scholarship. Philosophers might recognize Friedrich Nietzsche's academic fate in this example. *The Birth of Tragedy* presented an interpretation of ancient tragedy for the sake of understanding Wagnerian opera. As a result he lost his job as a classicist at the University of Basel because of the book's presentist approach. Historians rightly reject the idea that the relevance of an historical inquiry is corrected to its ability to contribute to contemporary debates; many philosophers rightly embrace the idea.

Some philosophers even go so far as to argue that being informed by contemporary debates is a necessary condition for good philosophical work in the history of philosophy. Richard Rorty claims that "Sellars's maxim that 'history of philosophy without philosophy is blind' is exactly right: unless you take part in the philosophical controversies of your own time you cannot figure out what is living and what is dead in the work of earlier philosophers."<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Bennett agrees, but for a different reason: "Much historically motivated work on early modern philosophy is philosophically lax, superficial, and uninformed. ... Early modern studies would be healthier, more muscular, if every practitioner also sometimes did work that was purely philosophical and in no way historical."<sup>5</sup> According to those like Rorty, Sellars, and Bennett a

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<sup>4</sup> *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty* (Library of Living Philosophers), edited by Randall Auxier and Lewis Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 2010), 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Learning from Six Philosophers, Vol. 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2. The full quote reads, "Much historically motivated work on early modern philosophy is philosophically lax, superficial, and uninformed. Some throw the word 'teleological' around without, apparently, having worked on teleology in its own right. People write about causation in early modern philosophy without understanding the issues concerning event-versus fact-versus agent-causation; about dispositions without having worked on counterfactuals; about 'ideas' without having struggled independently with the concept of meaning; and so on. Early modern studies would be healthier, more muscular, if every practitioner also sometimes did work that was purely philosophical and in no way historical."

philosophically valuable history of philosophy is one that directly informs contemporary debates, and therefore must be informed by an understanding of those debates. The work in the history of philosophy could directly contribute in one of two ways. It could reveal neglected positions and arguments, or it could reveal that current debates rest on a conceptual mistakes, mistakes with histories such that earlier philosophers might not have made the same conceptual mistakes.

To treat philosophers as potential contributors to contemporary debates requires the presumption that our contemporary philosophical questions are similar enough to those questions raised by past philosophers that we could see ourselves as colleagues. Bennett defends what he calls the collegial approach, quoting Paul Grice: “I treat those who are great but dead as if they were great and living, as persons who have something to say to us now.”<sup>6</sup> Bennett argues that we should study “the texts in the spirit of a colleague, an antagonist, a student, a teacher—aiming to learn as much philosophy as one can from studying them.”<sup>7</sup> Only by treating them as contemporary conversation partners can we assure that they are contributing to contemporary debates.

On the other extreme are antiquarian philosophers of the history of philosophy—a term Daniel Garber has embraced to refer to those philosophers who think studying the history of philosophy should not be done with a concern for informing contemporary philosophical debates. Fredrick Beiser writes, “I do not think it is the task of the philosophical historian to prejudge relevance by imposing one contemporary perspective on the past. The relevance of [their views] should not be read into their texts; rather it should be inferred from them, *after* the

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<sup>6</sup> “Reply to Richards” in R.E. Grandy and R. Warner, eds. *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality: Intentions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 66.

<sup>7</sup> *Learning from Six Philosophers, Vol. 1*, 1.

work of historical reconstruction.”<sup>8</sup> Starting with contemporary concerns in mind keeps us from being able to understanding the concerns the philosopher was actually addressing. Beiser might even agree with Rorty, Sellars, and Bennett that an understanding of contemporary debates is helpful for doing the history of philosophy well—it trains us to read carefully, to think carefully, and to be attuned to philosophical insights. Beiser might also argue that the views we uncover through our historically careful interpretations could contribute directly to contemporary philosophical concerns, but even if they don’t contribute directly, antiquarian philosophers defend the view that they will contribute indirectly. They have a pedagogical usefulness in providing a shared set of reference points across all philosophers, they give philosophers a sense of the vast range of philosophical approaches and positions that have been held through philosophy’s diverse history.

Garber is the most forceful proponent of this approach to the history of philosophy—what he calls the antiquarian or, elsewhere, the disinterested approach. He describes it using Spinoza as an example.

It involves coming to understand what Spinoza or a contemporary of his would have considered unproblematic background beliefs, what they would have had trouble with, and in the light of that and other similar contexts, coming to understand what Spinoza’s conception of his project was, how he thought he had established the conclusions he had reached, and what he thought was important about those conclusions, all under the assumption that, by and large, Spinoza’s project is the work of a smart person working within a particular historical context.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006), xi.

<sup>9</sup> “Does History have a Future: Some Reflections on Bennett and Doing Philosophy Historically” in *Descartes Embodied: Reading Cartesian Philosophy through Cartesian Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 19.

More important than contemporary relevance is historical accuracy. Garber joins the historians in raising concerns about history of philosophy that is focused too strongly on contemporary concerns. Such an approach may lead to anachronistic readings and focusing on philosophical issues that were less important to the historical figures than they are to us now. According to Garber, the contemporary value of studying past philosophers rests in its ability to shake us from thinking the way we do philosophy now is the way it has always been done. When a crisis arises a historically informed philosopher will be better prepared at finding new ways of going forward. Bennett's concern is that, as useful as it might be in producing texts for philosophical work, antiquarian history of philosophy is no longer able to distinguish itself from the history of ideas.

We have then one set of approaches to the history of philosophy that stress the direct relevance of the philosopher's view for contemporary philosophizing; the drawback is that unless done very well it risks distorting the views of the texts being interpreted. We have another set of approaches that stress the historical accuracy of the interpretations and forestall questions of contemporary philosophical relevance; they are effectively moving away from doing distinctively philosophical history of philosophy and towards doing intellectual history.

Two key similarities need to be emphasized across these approaches. First, both approaches require philosophical training. In the first approach, what Bennett calls the collegial approach and Rorty calls "rational reconstruction," one must be familiar with the contemporary philosophical landscape in order to know if the historical texts are providing new and insightful positions or arguments on contemporary topics. Likewise if one is going to argue that philosophy has conceptually gone astray and that we should return to earlier positions, ones that don't share the current set of terms, one must be well-versed in the current debates. In the second approach,

Garber's antiquarianism, or what Rorty calls "historical reconstruction" philosophical training is needed in order to recognize the philosophically relevant features of the author's views.

The second similarity is the need to be sympathetic readers. All philosophers working on the history of philosophy share the basic thought that they are reading the writings of exceptionally intelligent people. Exceptionally intelligent people do not make foolish mistakes. So if you think, upon reading a text, that the author has made a foolish mistake, you should instead conclude that your interpretation is mistaken and you should adjust your interpretation to explain why what looks like a foolish mistake isn't. Something like this is often called "The Principle of Charity." Fredrick Beiser gives a perfect example of how it works in his book on German Idealism. He points out that there are not just competing, but opposite interpretations of what the philosopher J.G. Fichte was trying to do. Both interpretations can't be right, and both ascribe foolish mistakes to Fichte. Beiser writes, "Obviously the best reading of Fichte's idealism would combine the strengths, and avoid the weaknesses, of both interpretations."<sup>10</sup> That is a remarkable thought that the best interpretation is one that makes his view most defensible, and Beiser takes it as *obvious* that that's the way philosophers working in the history of philosophy should work. It's understandable that some philosophers are concerned that giving an author too much charity means never being able to simply say the author was wrong. Bennett is especially concerned with "making 'What the great philosopher said is true' an axiom, or even a dominant guiding principle."<sup>11</sup> The goal must be to find a way to interpret the philosopher's views such that one is being charitable, but still allowing him or her to be mistaken.

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<sup>10</sup> *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 218.

<sup>11</sup> *Learning from Six Philosophers, Vol. 1*, 10.

## Peaceful coexistence?

Rorty, Garber, and Bennett all agree that the different ways of doing the history of philosophy can coexist peacefully. They might even complement each other. Garber says “there is no reason why one must choose one conception of the history of philosophy over the other...[they] are complementary, not competing.”<sup>12</sup> Richard Watson, drawing upon his distinction between analytic and historicist history of philosophy suggests that the two approaches can complement and illuminate each other. Robert Brandom says, “it is a mistake to think that one or the other of these styles of content specification gets things right in a way the other does not.”<sup>13</sup> Yet not everyone is convinced that both approaches are on equal philosophical footing. Quentin Skinner disagrees. He makes the compelling point that to think carefully about the history of philosophy we need to think carefully about what it means *in general* to understand a text. One needs a “proper understanding of any given literary or philosophical work” and of “the conditions necessary for the understanding of utterances.”<sup>14</sup> Skinner is an intentionalist—to understand the meaning of a text is to understand the meaning intended by the author of the text. Just as in everyday conversations we want to know what someone means when he or she says something; likewise when we are interpreting a text and we hit a difficult sentence or idea, we ask: What is the philosopher trying to communicate here? What did he or she have in mind?

We must look to historical and contextual features to answer question of what the author had in mind. If what it means to understand a text is to correctly grasp the author’s intended meanings, then we need to side with Garber’s antiquarian approach to the history of philosophy. Whatever philosophers of the past were intending to do, it’s impossible for them have been

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<sup>12</sup> “Does History have a Future: Some Reflections on Bennett and Doing Philosophy Historically,” 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press: 2002), 104.

<sup>14</sup> “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” in *History and Theory*, 8/1 (1969), 4.



intending to contribute to debates over a thousand years after their death. Skinner argues that we must restrict ourselves in our interpretations to the possible beliefs and ideas the person could have had at the time of writing.

If a given statement or other action has been performed by an agent at will, and has a meaning for him, it follows that any plausible account of what the agent meant must necessarily fall under, and make use of, the range of descriptions which the agent himself could at least in principle have applied to describe and classify what he was doing.<sup>15</sup>

Many of the confusions surrounding the history of philosophy stem from thinking we are trying to understand a text, when in fact we are trying to understand a person's actions. Skinner embraces Ludwig Wittgenstein's aphorism "words are deeds"; the text is a record of actions — arguing, explaining, articulating, rejecting and affirming — and actions are understood by understanding the intentions of the agent.

Skinner's arguments guide us away from simply being resigned to multiple ways of doing the history of philosophy towards a view about the best way to do the history of philosophy, and it's rooted in an obvious point: we need to think about what occurs when we understand a text, as that's what philosophers working in the history of philosophy are doing. But intentionalism has been under attack for decades. Brandom says, "baldly put, hardly anyone would today subscribe to this picture."<sup>16</sup> Is there a general account of textual understanding that can avoid being intentionalist and that can help us move beyond the impasse of two rival, problematic approaches to the history of philosophy?

### **Logic of Question and Answer:**

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<sup>15</sup> "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Tales of the Might Dead*, 92.

Here we can return to Gadamer to see how his view sets him apart from those we've just considered. Gadamer inherits from R. G. Collingwood the idea that when we interpret a text what we need to do is to find a question to which the text is an answer. An intuitive version of Skinner's proposal is to ask what problem the author was attempting to solve by writing the text. If you start from that intuitive point, and remove the intentionalist focus, you get the somewhat different question: What is the question to which the text is an answer? That's not the same as asking What question was the author trying to answer in this text? because what the author accomplished may go beyond what he or she thought she was trying to do with the text. Instead, it's the question, What philosophical problems does this text solve? This can of course converge with what the author thought he or she was doing, but it need not.

With Collingwood, we can say that we understand only when we understand the question to which something is the answer, but the intention of what is understood in this way does not remain foregrounded against our own intention. Rather, reconstructing the question to which the meaning of a text is understood as an answer merges with our own questioning. For the text must be understood as an answer to a real question.<sup>17</sup>

Gadamer's focus on finding questions to which texts are the answer connects with insights shared by analytic historians of philosophy. Bennett writes,

Garber says the study of the history of philosophy is valuable because of the questions it suggests to us. That seems to me extremely important. Sometimes I find that historical studies introduce to me questions that I don't think I would have got from anywhere else; so that is one of the things for which I look to the history of philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

Yet neither Bennett nor Garber see the search for questions as the essential process of doing the history of philosophy—Garber focuses on views and Bennett focuses on arguments. What Gadamer calls the Logic of Question and Answer cuts across the distinctions between the

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<sup>17</sup> *Truth and Method*, 366.

<sup>18</sup> "Reply to Richards," 62.

analytic and antiquarian (or de re and de dicto, or rational reconstructionist and historical reconstructionist) approaches to the history of philosophy.

Gadamer thinks there are some restrictions on kinds of questions that will help us to understand a philosopher's views. First, the question will inevitably be a question that makes sense in the historical context of the philosopher. Only such historically appropriate questions will be able to make sense of the text as a whole, and it remains a central feature of hermeneutics that any part of a text can only be understood in the context of the whole text. The text itself can only be understood in the context of the author's work as a whole. As is well known, hermeneutics also hold that the whole of a text or a whole of a person's work can only be understood in light of the parts of the text or the parts of a person's work. This relation between part and whole is sometimes called the hermeneutic circle. In the context of Gadamer's discussion of the logic of question and answer it takes the form of restricting to questions to ones that could make sense at the time, since only such questions will be able to make sense of the text as a whole. Gadamer writes,

We can understand a text only when we have understood the question to which it is an answer. But since this question can be derived solely from the text and accordingly the appropriateness of the reply is the methodological presupposition for the reconstruction of the question, any criticism of this reply from some other quarter is pure shadow boxing. ... This is, in fact, an axiom of all hermeneutics; we described it above as the "fore-conception of completeness."<sup>19</sup>

The fore-conception of completeness is the methodological presupposition of coherence both within a text and across texts by the same author. Gadamer is claiming that any question that can reveal the meaning of a text (as an answer) must be a question that makes sense given the other writings of the author. So although it need not be the actual question the author had in mind, it

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<sup>19</sup> *Truth and Method*, 363.

must be the kind of question the author would have recognized as needing an answer. Gadamer gives an example in his essay “Hermeneutics and Historicism.”

If in the *Theaetetus* Plato proposes the thesis that knowledge is exclusively perception by the senses, ... I do not, as a reader today, know the context that led him to this view. In my mind this context is a different one: namely the discussion that emerges from modern sensualism. ... [But] is not the re-enactment of Plato's idea, in fact, successful only if we grasp the true Platonic context (which I think is that of a mathematical theory of evidence that is not yet quite clear about the intelligible mode of being of mathematics)? And who will be able to grasp this context if they do not explicitly hold in abeyance the preconceptions of modern sensualism?<sup>20</sup>

To understand Plato’s claim about sense knowledge we need to see it as the answer to a question that makes sense in the contexts of Plato’s writings. It may make perfect sense to us in the context of sense-data theories of perception, but that context could not have been Plato’s context. Instead Gadamer suggests we need to read Plato’s statement in the context of mathematical knowledge where mathematical objects are thought to be available to the senses. Or to put it that way, it’s hard to see how Plato could think that knowledge is exclusively perception by the senses if he believed that knowledge is tied to the forms and the forms are known only through the mind. However, if we understand Plato as responding to a tradition that failed to understand the ideal character of mathematical knowledge then we’ve provided the question that makes intelligible the statement. It also allows us to see what we would answer to the question and what other possible answers would be. Here Gadamer is echoing a concern of the antiquarian philosophers that we make sure our readings are not anachronistic. Making a point of choosing interpretations that disclose the text itself as coherent, and as coherent with the larger context of the author’s works, limits the likelihood of anachronistic questions.

In addition, a question cannot be a generic philosophical question—as if philosophy were a long history of people in different times asking about being, freedom, ethics, God, and

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<sup>20</sup> *Truth and Method*, 515.

knowledge, for example. In the essay “Conceptual History as Philosophy” Gadamer argues that the perennial philosophical problems are those that will have no final answer because they are continually being reformulated. There is not one “philosophical problem of the nature of freedom”; rather in different times with different concerns and presuppositions different questions of freedom arise. Serious philosophical work can only unfold in response to these questions (as well as in the proper formulation of the question to begin with.) Gadamer is concerned that we fail to sufficiently recognize the historical distance between our questions and the question to which the text is an answer. He writes, “We make it too easy for ourselves if a ‘problem’ is seen simply as a question to which there is an answer. Rather, a problem is precisely that which is thrown into our path and which cannot easily be avoided.”<sup>21</sup> Seeing the history of philosophy as a history of perennial problems forecloses a legitimate fusion of horizons through the questions.

The third feature Gadamer thinks constrains the choice of question is that it must be a recognizably philosophically motivating question. That is, it must be the kind of question to which it makes sense to give a philosophical answer. In “Language and Understanding” he makes this explicit.

Answering a question, however, entails grasping the sense of the question and therewith its background motivation. As we know only too well, nothing is so difficult as when we are supposed to answer so-called ‘dumb questions’, that is, questions that have no clear, univocal direction of meaning.<sup>22</sup>

More than just recognizing the question as not a dead question, and more than just recognizing the question as historically and culturally appropriate, we need to understand why one would ask the question and how it relates to our questioning. The difference between a philosophical

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<sup>21</sup> “Text Matters: Interview with Hans-Georg Gadamer,” in Richard Kearney *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 270.

<sup>22</sup> “Language and Understanding” in *Theory, Culture & Society* 23/1 (YEAR), 23.

approach to a text and a historical approach to a text is that the philosophical approach demonstrates how the text functions as either an answer to a philosophical question, or a philosophical answer to a situation that calls for one. The historical approach need not legitimate the text in this way.

### **Consequences for Issues in doing the History of Philosophy**

The first and most obvious benefit to Gadamer's account is that it provides guidelines for a charitable reading. We need not provide an interpretation that makes a text true, whatever it takes, but we need to provide an interpretation that shows how the text is a legitimate, philosophical answer to a meaningful question. That provides a criteria for what it means to put a text in the best light and shows how we are always in a position to learn from the texts we read without having to lose our ability to be critical of those text. It is important, on Gadamer's view, that we come to recognize not only the rationality of the text as an answer to a question, but the insightfulness of the question itself. An insightful question is one worth taking seriously, but we can tell if it is insightful without taking it seriously.

The second significant gain from Gadamer's view is that it is impossible to properly understand a text without engaging the questions to which the text is an answer. There are no disengaged interpretations and the mistake attempt to step back from the questions addressed, as if such stepping back were the mark of impartiality, results in a failure to appreciate what the philosopher accomplishes with his or her text. We are forced to engage by the kinds of virtuous circles hermeneutics has made famous. We cannot understand a question without asking the question and considering what would count as satisfactory answers to that question--"To

understand a question means to ask it”<sup>23</sup>—and we cannot understand a text properly except as an answer to a question. Gadamer writes,

The most important thing is the question that the text puts to us, our being perplexed by the traditional word, so that understanding it must already include the task of the historical self-mediation between the present and tradition. Thus the relation of question and answer is, in fact, reversed. The voice that speaks to us from the past—whether text, work, trace—itself poses a question and places our meaning in openness. In order to answer the question put to us, we the interrogated must ourselves begin to ask questions. We must attempt to reconstruct the question to which the traditional text is the answer. But we will be unable to do so without going beyond the historical horizon it presents us. Reconstructing the question to which the text is presumed to be the answer itself takes place within a process of questioning through which we try to answer the question that the text asks us. A reconstructed question can never stand within its original horizon: for the historical horizon that circumscribed the reconstruction is not a truly comprehensive one. It is, rather, included within the horizon that embraces us as the questioners who have been encountered by the traditional word.<sup>24</sup>

A text, for Gadamer, only becomes meaningful when it is interpreted, and it is only properly interpreted when we understand what we have to learn from it. But what we have to learn from the text—the insights the text has to reveal to us—are not likely to be those insights the author intended to convey, for we can’t help but be reading the text in a different context from which it was written. Furthermore, if we need to understand a text as an answer to a question, and we can only understand a question by engaging the questions, which is to say, by considering what might count as plausible answers to the question, then, of necessity, any understanding of a text will be an understanding as one among other possible answers to the question. A successful interpretation must show why the author presents the one particular answer from among others, but it cannot but help go beyond what the author could have considered plausible answers to the question. For plausible answers to the question will occur to us in light of us working in a much

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<sup>23</sup> *Truth and Method*, 368.

<sup>24</sup> *Truth and Method*, 365-66.

later time from the author, in a philosophical culture that is likely influenced by the author and by traditions of responding, criticizing, and providing alternatives to the author's view which the author in principle could never have anticipated. This is the justification for Gadamer's controversial claim that "not just occasionally, but always the meaning of a text goes beyond its author."<sup>25</sup> This means, of course, that not just occasionally but always knowing the intentions of the author is insufficient for understanding the text, and intentionalism must be false.

The third benefit of Gadamer's view is that it provides straightforward answers to many of the questions at stake when reflecting upon the history of philosophy. Does the history of philosophy need to be done by someone with philosophical training? Gadamer's answer is yes. Evaluations must be constantly made about what counts as a philosophical question worth asking, and what counts as a legitimate philosophical answer to that question. These are the kinds of questions that only someone with experience reading and evaluating philosophical text can accomplish. Is the non-philosophical context relevant for the interpretation of the text? Gadamer's answer is that one can't tell from the outset. The question that makes the best sense of the text might be one that draws heavily on the non-philosophical context and it might not. One only knows case by case after the successful interpretation of the text. Must the interpretation of the text show how the text contributes to current philosophical concerns? Yes. Any good interpretation raises questions for us which we must answer for ourselves anew. It is the questions that make the text necessarily relevant. Finally, is there a clear differentiation between the history of philosophy and the history of ideas? The history of philosophy always interprets a text in such a way that the text is shown to be a philosophically legitimate answer either to a

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<sup>25</sup> *Truth and Method*, 296.



philosophical question, or to a situation that calls for a philosophical response. For these reasons, the history of philosophy is philosophy.

## Conclusion

As a conclusion, compare Gadamer's focus on the question with Paul Oskar Kristeller's views about the difference between the history of philosophy and the history of ideas. Kristeller was the founder of the *Journal for the History of Philosophy*. In his seminal essay "History of Philosophy and History of Ideas" he justifies the need for the journal in by differentiating what a philosopher of history done from a Lovejoy-inspired intellectual historian. According to Kristeller, a historian of philosophy will be concerned about placing the philosopher's views in the broader philosophical context; a historian of ideas will be more interested in placing the philosophers views "within the context of the surrounding non-philosophical thought with which they may be more or less closely connected."<sup>26</sup> Bernard Williams expressed a similar view when he wrote that "the history of ideas is history before it is philosophy, while with the history of philosophy it is the other way round."<sup>27</sup> Contemporary historians of philosophy debate the extent to which the non-philosophical historical context is relevant for doing the history of philosophy; Gadamer does not need to get drawn into that debate. Gadamer has a "proof is in the pudding" approach. On Gadamer's view there is no principled answer to the question about the use of non-philosophical contextual information. What matters is the best philosophical interpretation, the interpretation that makes the best philosophical sense of the text. If non-philosophical contexts are relevant, that does not delegitimize it a philosophical interpretation.

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<sup>26</sup> "History of Philosophy and History of Ideas" in *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* 2/1 (1964), 13.

<sup>27</sup> Bernard Williams, *Descartes: the Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 9.

Kristeller also argues that philosophers of history, as opposed to historian of ideas, should not just “objectively interpret” a philosopher’s views, but should submit them to “critical analysis”—yet “the two tasks should be kept separate and that the objective interpretation should precede the critical discussion.”<sup>28</sup> Gadamer denies that we can separate these two functions if we are working in the history of philosophy. Some scholars see intellectual history as what philosophers should do before doing philosophy. First understand the views and arguments, then subject them to philosophical analysis and “take a position towards the work.”<sup>29</sup> Gadamer argues that working in the history of philosophy is essential different from working in the history of ideas. To take seriously the text as answering a question requires one to seek philosophical questions or situations to which the text could be an intelligible response. Both in seeking the question and in presenting the text as a response to that question require a thorough understanding of philosophical views and arguments.

Kristeller also argues that

the views of a past philosopher must be interpreted, at least in part, as meaningful and intelligible, if not as true, and in this respect every past thought has an eternal dimension that detaches it from the accidental circumstances of the time in which it was expressed and makes it present to the interpreter who belongs to a different time and speaks a different language.<sup>30</sup>

Gadamer can make explicit to what extent a text must be interpreted as meaningful, intelligible, “if not as true.” The text is made intelligible as providing a reasonable, philosophical answer, to

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<sup>28</sup> “History of Philosophy and History of Ideas,” 11.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur argues that the history of philosophy is not really philosophy. “The work of a historian of philosophy... does not pose problems which differ from those we would encounter in a reading of Plato, Descartes, or Kant. A philosophical interpretation is the work of a philosopher. It presupposes the sort of reading which makes a claim to objectivity but goes on to take a position toward the work” . . . . [P]hilosophy (or, as is awkwardly said, general philosophy) and the history of philosophy are two distinct philosophical activities.” (“A Philosophical Interpretation of Freud” in *The Conflict of Interpretation* [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007], 160–61).

<sup>30</sup> “History of Philosophy and History of Ideas,” 11.

a situation that calls for philosophical response. Moreover, if we take true to mean revelatory, as Gadamer does, then the proper interpretation of a philosophical text shows how it provides an insightful answer to an illuminating question. The eternal dimension of a text lies in its ability to continually raise new questions for us, not because it's claims have essentially trans-historical status. Gadamer can explain why classic texts can be successfully reinterpreted for centuries without having to conclude previous interpreters simply failed to get it right.

The most significant difference is that Kristeller thinks philosophy has been a 2500 year “specific and continuous tradition” with “a specific method and function” with a commitment to “a truth at which all philosophers have been aiming.”<sup>31</sup> According to Kristeller contemporary philosophy can learn from the history of philosophy because we are engaged in the same project. Our questions are their questions, so their answers are still relevant today. Gadamer neither begins with an idea of the nature of philosophy to which we must all belong, nor with a list of perennial philosophical problems. The continuity of the philosophical project is not taken for granted. It is because we have different questions that the history of philosophy is relevant today. If there is any continuity on Gadamer's view, it lies in the value of asking questions, in the centrality of dialogue, and in the Socratic humility of acknowledging we have something to learn from every text, if we can just find the right questions.

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<sup>31</sup> “History of Philosophy and History of Ideas,” 6.