

BOOK REVIEW

Robert Scharff's

*How History Matters to Philosophy*

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Robert Scharff. *How History Matters to Philosophy: Reconsidering Philosophy's Past after Positivism*. New York: Routledge, 2014. 321 pages.

Nur das Wie ist wiederholbar.

Heidegger, *Der Begriff der Zeit* (GA 64: 123)

*How History Matters to Philosophy* is one of those rarest of works today, the product of a lifetime of sustained, serious thought on philosophy and philosophizing, at once studious and learned, fresh and challenging at every turn. In the book Robert Scharff makes the case for a philosophy that functions in the midst of life rather than attempting to take up a standpoint at a distance from it. This philosophy is a hermeneutical phenomenology, bent on retrieving and intensifying life as it is lived or, alternatively, the history that we make and embody. History matters to philosophy, not simply because it inherits a tradition, but because philosophy and being authentically historical are one and the same. "Being authentically historical" means, among other things, a vital understanding (an understanding of existence) that engages in

*Gatherings: The Heidegger Circle Annual* 8 (2018): 85–96.

the never-ending struggle with life's own tendency to let a seemingly self-evident tradition take the lead in living.

Examples of this vital understanding can be found in key figures in the history of philosophy – Socrates, Descartes, and Comte – whose names are linked to the founding of philosophical traditions (Platonism, Cartesianism, positivism) that would seemingly deny its efficacy and, with it, the importance of history to philosophy and science. In the first part of *How History Matters to Philosophy* Scharff demonstrates how, to the contrary, this vital understanding animates their thought, albeit often in ways that these thinkers themselves failed to note. In the second part of the book, he turns to Heidegger's critical appropriation of the different, if limited ways that Dilthey and Nietzsche appreciate this vital understanding. While Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology is the paradigm, *How History Matters to Philosophy* demonstrates precisely how the philosophical endeavors of his predecessors examined here are its historical precursors.

The opening chapter of *How History Matters to Philosophy* sets the stage for this demonstration by considering how, at least since Descartes' epistemological imperative put down history in favor of science, philosophy has tended to think of itself ahistorically. Philosophers can't seem to keep themselves from adopting a view from nowhere even when and even in the way they want to criticize the very idea of having a view from nowhere. (Scharff shows how Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor exemplify just how complex this predicament of post-positivist philosophers is and how difficult it is to incorporate the insight that all thinking is historically contextualized. For example, Rorty's assumption that the movement beyond positivism is a matter of choice of an array of standpoints betrays his continuing embrace of an ahistorical ideal.) While it is hard to overestimate the importance of this observation about the Western philosophical tradition's predilections, no less acute and compelling is Scharff's observation that these predilections are themselves a product of history. Presuming to think from nowhere is a way of "being" historical.

Starting with Socrates, Scharff reminds us that his story is not that of some decontextualized source of paradoxes, but of “Socrates the Athenian” who possesses a “vital understanding” of things and examines his life with view to enhancing that understanding. Scharff reviews commentators’ vain struggle to find a Socratic knowledge, leading Vlastos to the conclusion that it might be a misnomer, with the suggestion that Socrates left us merely unanswered questions. But in the end, Scharff submits, Vlastos’ influential early and late readings of Socrates are a bundle of anachronisms. Perhaps the central anachronism is that of trying to reconcile Socrates’ statements as though their fundamental import is that of an “epistemic objectivism,” accessible through a specific method, for the sake of making claims whose possible warrant is for us to determine. (Hence, the view is floated that not having absolutely certain knowledge is compatible with justifiable moral knowledge). Vlastos’ critics (e.g., Nehamas) are infected by a similar need to give Socratic philosophizing a “modern makeover” (48). In Nehamas’ case, the modern, liberal or existential sense of a “private act of self-creation” is foisted upon the figure of Socrates. Scharff counters these approaches with an account of “Socratic philosophizing” as part of a very personal, vital understanding, inseparable from the given, situated sense of things, only indirectly accessible (hence, the confessions of ignorance), and continually subjected to re-examination and improvement without closure. In this way, as Scharff’s glosses on the relevant dialogues demonstrate, Socrates exemplifies what it is to think vitally and speak meaningfully in *medias res*, i.e., “how it is to ‘be’ historical” (62).

Turning to Descartes, Scharff notes the irony of a commentator such as Bernard Williams decrying Descartes’ ahistorical pretensions on one hand, while offering a rational reconstruction of Descartes’ project and applauding its ahistorical aspirations, on the other. In this chapter Scharff demonstrates that Descartes is not quite the Cartesian that objectivistic interpreters of his thought take him to be. In the *Meditations, Replies*, and elsewhere, for example, Descartes seeks not readers bent on “reconstructing” his arguments formally, but “co-meditators” who share his “vital understanding” of being “a *medium quid* between

God and nothingness” (77, 81). To be sure, Scharff concedes, Descartes’ practice is one thing, his reflections on it another – “Descartes’ own non-Cartesian practice” and his “Cartesian self-image” (92) – the latter abetting commentators’ practice of studying Descartes’ texts in an objectivistic manner. Nevertheless, Scharff demonstrates that Descartes personalizes epistemology, never presuming to adopt a View From Nowhere, a version of scientism (totalizing scientific understanding) or the idea of a philosophy conducted ahistorically (90). Here, as in the case of Socrates, a reputed source of an ahistorical tradition of philosophizing is the embodiment of *being* historical.

Auguste Comte is Scharff’s third and last example of a presumed source of modern ahistorical prejudices who, under examination, shows that his true stripes are anything but that.<sup>1</sup> Anticipating the general argument, he labels Comte “the last honest positivist,” a positivist who gives “a historico-critical articulation of how it is to be in the midst of things,” an articulation that continues to shape the “background understanding” of many today (105). His aim in this chapter is to show how history matters philosophically to Comte (134). Scharff begins by explaining why, in the so-called “post-positivist” present era, the basic thrust of 19th-century positivism lives on. The reason, he submits, is “a quite general sense of *how to be philosophical in a technoscientific age*” (107). This sense is once again a vital understanding that often lives, to be sure, below the positivists’ own radar, with one prominent exception: Comte. He is the exception because he insists upon reflecting upon – and arguing for – a scientific understanding and its historical genesis and, refusing to reduce its development to a matter of knowledge, sees science as an ongoing project of “Order and Progress” (109–113). Scharff provides illuminating glosses on Comte’s treatments of the theological, the metaphysical, and the “coming scientific era,” demonstrating in each case how a vital understanding motivates developments within a stage and – importantly – *transformations* from one *historical* stage to the next. Because “science is a process, not the repeated enactment of a structure,” i.e., because it is a process of transforming rather than replacing previous pre-scientific approaches, “a human practice [that]...

articulates our worldly encounters,” Comte’s positivism is bent on description, not rational reconstruction of science (129–30). The pre-eminence assigned to sociology, as Comte understands it, further evidences his tendency to give life, not epistemology the last word (132), just as his insistence on living through the stages of theology and metaphysics for the sake of understanding science demonstrates that we are not fundamentally scientific, but “practical” (134). In a telling line, capturing the sense of being historical that Scharff has demonstrated in Comte’s positivism, Comte writes: “We philosophers ‘always labor for our descendants but under the impetus of our ancestors’” (137).

As with Descartes, however, there are two sides to Comte’s writings, the one that Scharff aims to recover and the familiar figure who is said to anticipate 20th-century positivism. The legacy of the latter is a positivist legacy that is “inherited but not surpassed,” meaning that it lingers on with the image that the future will be more of the same and then some. At this point Scharff introduces the second part of his study, as he argues for the possibility that technoscience is not the endgame (a possibility envisioned to different degrees of perspicacity by Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Heidegger). Scharff begins this second part of the book with consideration of Dilthey’s insight that, in order to establish a “second” kind of science, it is necessary to challenge the positivist program’s ontology, precisely because it suppresses the standpoint of experienced life (history as it is made and lived, coinciding roughly with what Scharff, particularly in the first part of *How History Matters to Philosophy*, conceives as “vital understanding”). Scharff demonstrates that Dilthey in his best moments – anticipating Heidegger – realized how this standpoint of life and the understanding (*Verstehen*) it entails, beyond merely securing an approach for the humanities different from that of the natural sciences (*Erklären*), underlies *any* science, natural or human (159–62, 173). He thus opens the possibility, not of going behind “experienced life” (which is impossible), but of starting with it and thinking this truth about it, leading to a grounding, reflective self-awareness (*Selbstbesinnung*). In Dilthey’s own words (quoted by Scharff), “we are historical beings before being observers of history”

(163) – and, we might add, before being observers of nature as well. Scharff makes a strong case that Heidegger, very early on, read Dilthey in just this way, shaping the thinking that culminates in *Being and Time*. “Dilthey’s most important achievement” in Heidegger’s eyes is his recognition that all philosophical thinking has its time-space, that “no philosophical outlook” achieves a Cartesian standpoint – even if Dilthey himself, saddled with epistemological concerns, fails to recognize its implications for his own work (174–75).

Scharff’s next step is to show how Nietzsche, not least in his retrospective self-assessments, takes his bearings from the task of an unabated, creative “self-renewal” as the key to “living a genuinely rich and vital life” (193–94). As Nietzsche puts it in an opening line from the *Birth of Tragedy*, the task requires us “to look at science through the prism of the artist, but also to look at art through the prism of life.” A similar perspective animates Nietzsche’s *Second Untimely Meditation*, as he insists on the connection between *Historie* and life. Here Scharff seizes upon Nietzsche’s insight that being historical entails “the double experience of *already being something but not quite properly prepared by it for the current experience of a desired future*” (201).<sup>2</sup> For an age addicted to historical science, knowledge of the past as a set of objects undermines our vital understanding of this experience, reducing the future to what will happen rather than something that is ours to fashion creatively in the present out of what has been handed down to us. Scharff observes that it is precisely Nietzsche’s awareness of the pitfalls of excessively monumental, antiquarian, or critical approaches to history that explains – without exculpating – Nietzsche’s sometimes excessive polemic and valorization of a condition surpassing historical life (203–8). Scharff ends his gloss by demonstrating the temporal significance, unity and order of the three approaches. That significance lies in the way that the future-looking inspiration provided by monumental history, its tempering by the reverence for the past that animates antiquarian history, and the motivation in the present that comes from critical history converge in “actual, creative practice” (213). At the same time, much like the previous philosophers discussed

in the volume and then some, Nietzsche is able to grasp this temporal significance because of a vital understanding that he shows without always explicitly expressing (215).

The last two steps in Scharff's argument consist in showing how Heidegger fulfills the promise of Dilthey and Nietzsche. Heidegger recovers Dilthey's basic insight that lived experience can be illuminated by remaining within the experience and not objectifying it. Natorp is one of Heidegger's foils here, as Scharff notes, since Natorp insists that phenomenology necessarily fails on this score. This despite the fact that Natorp's own strategy of reconstructing subjectivity, as Heidegger points out, not only is itself a form of objectification but also, contrary to Natorp's self-understanding, must draw upon a pre-theoretical access to lived experience. Husserl is also a foil in this regard, as Scharff recounts how Heidegger, while rejecting Husserl's absolutism as well as his unfounded privileging of perception and reflection, nonetheless retrieves his principle of all principles as something primal and pre-theoretical. Putting the strategy of destructive retrieval explicitly on display – a strategy animating every chapter of Scharff's wonderful book – Heidegger makes the observation that Husserl shows as much without explicitly saying so (240).<sup>5</sup>

Scharff completes this penultimate chapter by demonstrating Heidegger's destructive retrieval of: a) Dilthey's *Verstehen*, dubbed a "mindful awareness of life," available "before it turns into anything theoretical" (244); b) what Dilthey starts with, i.e., the surrounding world experienced by human-historical life (246–47); and c) the implication of Dilthey's "categories of life," namely, that understanding is ontological, "the mark of our basic condition," demanding a "hermeneutics of facticity" (253–56). Key here are the early lectures where Heidegger notes that we "can live unreflectively yet still mindfully" in factual life "and so stay thoughtfully aware of the full web of possible motivations" (243). Scharff notes, too, that this Dilthey-inspired phenomenology must be hermeneutical since it faces opposition, not only from other philosophies but from the inertia of its own inheritance (244). On these pages Scharff makes a powerful, compelling,

and peerless case for the ways that Heidegger's critical appropriation of Dilthey's thinking contributed, arguably more than any other source, to his hermeneutical phenomenology.

In the final chapter Scharff addresses "Nietzsche's unacknowledged, foreconceptual understanding of the sort of temporality that one lives-through before that life that falls under science-life dualism" (276). The takeaway for Heidegger here, Scharff submits, is the fact that Nietzsche (along with Dilthey) is able – in his best moments – to interpret historical life without falling prey to obsessive deconstruction or transcendental dreams. As Scharff puts it, "With such an understanding, they [Dilthey and Nietzsche] are on their way toward being 'authentically historical'" (280). Far from being something external to life, the chief impediment here is life's own tendency to counteract its awareness of its movement, to fall away from it. Decisive for these considerations is the operative conception of temporality, i.e., time not as constitutive of motion but as the arriving of what is coming. In this regard, as Scharff points out, Nietzsche's prioritizing of the monumental approach to history prefigures Heidegger's view of temporality and the priority that he accords the future.

In sum, we are always ahead of ourselves; the task is to be so authentically. Being so authentically requires not simply adopting this or that standpoint or perspective but – first and foremost – asking who we are such that we are motivated to adopt it. The point is so important that it deserves citing in full:

the prior question for Heidegger... is "who" we are such that particular purposes and perspectives can motivate our thinking but not necessarily in such a way that the fact of these motivations gets lost in theoretically carrying them out. (287)

Only by asking this question are we able to recognize how we are beholden in one way or another to the very tradition that strikes us as getting things wrong. Only by asking this question do we maximize our chances of finding what really motivates and of philosophizing in the midst of life. With its model exemplifications of destructive retrieval

(in the cases of Socrates, Descartes, Comte, Dilthey, and Nietzsche), *How History Matters to Philosophy* demonstrates how history, suitably understood, matters to these philosophers. But the volume's central achievement is arguably its implications for our philosophizing today and how history matters to it.

For all the reasons detailed above, *How History Matters to Philosophy* is a work of considerable importance, demonstrating the promise of Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology. Yet while agreeing with much of Scharff's argument, I would like to conclude by raising some critical questions. I raise these questions in the interest of strengthening the approach that he is advocating in his study.

- 1) Destructive retrieval, Heidegger's approach to other philosophies, so masterfully exemplified in Scharff's work, has all the appearances of a method, a particular way (*Wie*), distinguishable from other ways of approaching philosophy and its history. That is to say, it is a procedure that can be repeated because there are specific constants involved, for example, a philosopher's motivations and his writings, what he says as opposed to what he shows, what "mattering" means from case to case. These constants transcend, or are at least presumed to transcend, any particular philosopher or period of philosophy. As such, they are not historical in the same way that the philosophers themselves (both those examined and those examining) are. So in this respect, at least, there seem to be limits to being historical or at least to the practice and articulation of what it means for any philosopher to be historical, not least in considering other philosophers (past and present) in this way. Heidegger seems to be conceding as much, not only in the citation from *Der Begriff der Zeit* cited at the beginning of this paper, but also in his occasional remarks that there is nothing new or no progress in philosophy itself. If *How History Matters to Philosophy* countenances such limits, it does not appear to voice them. If it does not countenance them, it is unclear how it would address the considerations above that suggest such limits.

- 2) Three aspects of Heidegger's early phenomenology are ignored, arguably to the detriment of the account of it in Scharff's study.

The *first* aspect is the need for formality. It is, to be sure, a non-objectifying formality but a formality nonetheless in order for the thinking to avoid devolving into biography, autobiography, or a purely contextual study.<sup>4</sup> Herein lies one of the senses of a "*formal* indication," serving as a marker for phenomenological scrutiny. Heidegger himself makes no bones about the need for formality in his defense of formalization, as he criticizes Natorp for failing to appreciate the difference between formalization and generalization.

The *second* aspect is Heidegger's identification (in lectures of the 1920s) of the key role played by phenomenological construction and the artful aspect of phenomenology. In some ways these dimensions could easily be incorporated into Scharff's interpretation, but they are strangely absent from it (as is Heidegger's positive appropriation of phenomenological reduction).

The *third* aspect is the determinateness provided by formal indications. Formal indications indicate formally, but that does not keep them from rendering the phenomenological investigation determinate. A formal indication indicates one thing rather than another and thereby, in effect, demarcates relevance. To be sure, Heidegger himself is often vague on this demarcation and its rationale. But that is his problem and should not be ours. To see the import of this point, consider, for example, talk of *mat-tering*, itself presumably a formal indication, that is central to Scharff's argument. As a formal indication, what does it – from case to case – include and, on pain of being indeterminate, exclude and, no less importantly, why?<sup>5</sup>

- 3) Heidegger's understanding of metaphysics is fairly limited and pretty parochial, even by the standards of the early 20th century. So, too, is Comte's account, particularly when compared with what falls under the rubric today. Yet some of Scharff's remarks about metaphysics seem merely to endorse their broad-stroked

conceptions of metaphysics. Notably, this holds true in spades for Heidegger when – or perhaps especially when – he acknowledges the difficulty of getting over it (*Verwindung*). At least he admits a certain ineluctability of metaphysics, even as he traditionally conceives it. Yet *How History Matters to Philosophy* seems at times to suggest that metaphysics – under some description or the other – is or at least should be a thing of the past.

- 4) Just how sweeping is the claim that philosophizing or doing science is historical supposed to be? Does this mean that *any* proposal of a synthetic a priori proposition is idle<sup>6</sup> and that *any* investigation into their possibility is a vain pursuit?<sup>7</sup>

These criticisms are offered in the hopes of augmenting discussion of Scharff's study, given the singular contribution that it makes. Scharff makes a formidable case for a way of philosophizing that breathes new life into the promise of Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenology. Scharff's call to a way of thinking that begins by asking who we are and from what situation we begin to philosophize is something that contemporary philosophers of every stripe desperately need to hear.

#### NOTES

- 1 See, too, Robert C. Scharff, *Comte After Positivism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 2 I quote this line, my favorite line in the book, to help give a sense of the élan and panache of Scharff's thinking.
- 3 For discussion of the process and features of destructive retrieval, see 272–74.

- 4 To see the need for formalization, it may be helpful to compare it to a script or a ritual. By refusing to work from a script, live street performers often impede – deliberately, to be sure – their ability to reproduce a successful performance. Depending upon memory and rote practices can be insufficient, particularly when a different troop tries its hand at such a performance. Similar considerations underlie early Christianity’s insistence upon ritual. Thus, early Christianity rejects as heresy the Donatists’ contention that the conveyance of grace depends, not upon the formal ritual, but upon the spiritual state of the minister. Heidegger sees that the communicability and, indeed, survival of phenomenology requires formalization, analogous to a script or ritual.
- 5 Are there markers for distinguishing what is and what is not relevant to thinking in the midst of life, to the lived experience? Is a plea for or acknowledgement of such markers necessarily a move away from life, lived experience?
- 6 Moreover, if it is idle, how is the following statement (which appears *prima facie* to be synthetic and *a priori*) not an example of such idleness? *How History Matters to Philosophy*, 131: “All of our mental operations, at any stage of development, are at bottom a response to experience that is forever concerned with human flourishing and with normalizing natural and social relations.”
- 7 With what appears to be its running assumption that ahistorical philosophizing is not an option, *How History Matters to Philosophy* can appear to rest on what has the look of being a transcendental, metaphysical, or – less charitably – dogmatic view (if it walks like a duck, etc.). What is the assumption if not a transcendental one, a metaphysical commitment? The kneejerk response here is, of course, that raising these questions belies historical conditions of their own. But is this response adequate (and what would “adequacy” mean here)?