

INTERNAL HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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I defend an internal history of philosophy that prioritizes philosophical reasons over cultural factors. This approach contrasts with a broadly contextualist endeavor invoking cultural factors without clear ground. I argue that the latter path is either too permissive or leads to aiming at a complete historical account. Neither way is acceptable: the former obliterates the correctness of interpretation; the latter dissolves history of philosophy in general history and is practically impossible. Instead, the internal history I propose – based primarily on Michael Frede's and Maurice Mandelbaum's historiography – prioritizes philosophical reasoning and appeals to external contextual factors in a principled way when it is necessary to supplement philosophical considerations.

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No historian of philosophy seems to doubt that their study requires considerations not strictly philosophical. In examining Plato, Kant, or Kripke and explaining their philosophical views, one cannot avoid referring to Socrates, Hume, or Wittgenstein, their social status, or theological, scientific, or political debates. While philosophers sometimes regard philosophy as timeless and independent of contingent historical circumstances (the context), a historical narrative and explanation of how philosophy evolved are impossible without considering the context. Looking for timeless philosophical problems, positions, and arguments in past philosophical texts has been called “rational reconstruction,” whereas searching for adequate and detailed interpretations of these texts has been called “contextualist history of philosophy.” Both are legitimate ways of approaching philosophical texts, but their usual labels, I argue, are misnomers. So, I suggest using “philosophical” and “historical” history of philosophy instead: the former approach has a philosophical aim, the latter a historical one.

I proceed from a recent article (Mercer 2019) defending the contextualist approach. Besides the terminological issue, its main shortcoming is the lack of a criterion to prioritize among contextual factors: what context should one use to correctly interpret and explain

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a historical text? Based on the accounts of Frede, Mandelbaum, and others, I argue that an internal history of philosophy should be targeted, prioritizing philosophical reasoning over contextual factors in explanation while invoking context in a principled way when the former remains inadequate to explain the desiderata.

I. Terminology

Mercer (2019, 530, 533 – 539) rightly identifies a difference in purpose between the two approaches. Contextualists are engaged in a study to identify and explain views and arguments of past philosophers in their own historical context, that is, to explain *historical facts*; reconstructivists aim to gather *philosophical ideas* from historical texts (sometimes irrespective of whether the given philosopher held such views) to use these philosophical munitions in their contemporary philosophizing. So, the distinction is between philosophical and historical *interests*.¹

But “contextualist” and “reconstructivist” denote methods: they describe how to proceed rather than what to aim at. As Mercer suggests, historians of early modern philosophy started to appeal to the historical context, which distinguishes the contextualist approach. Again, rational reconstruction proceeds from a pre-conceived idea of what problem the text is about and what approaches there might be to deal with that problem. These are different methods: one considers the context of a text, the other a known problem and the logical space for its solution.

But making the distinction of aims in *methodological* terms is misleading. Mercer reuses Skinner’s maxim for historical accuracy (Skinner 1969, 28 – 29) and calls it the “Getting Things Right Constraint” (GTRC): “historians of philosophy should not attribute claims or ideas to historical figures without concern for whether or not they are ones the figures would recognize as their own” (Mercer 2019, 530). The rule is clearly a criterion of acceptable historical interpretations, that is, truth in the history of philosophy. It requires conformity with historical evidence; since there is no other criterion for whether a dead philosopher would adopt a view or recognize it as her own but the historical (mainly textual) evidence. Skinner (1969, 28 – 29, 49) made this clear already,

¹ Many agree with this, e.g., Skinner (1969); Mandelbaum (1976, 720); Ayers (1978); Rorty, Schneewind, Skinner (1984, 1 – 14); Mash (1987, 291 – 299); Frede (1987, x, xxiii – xxv; 1988; 2022a, 6, 9 – 11, 18 – 19, 26, 45 – 46; 2022b, 173 – 174, 186 – 188); Normore (1990, 204 – 210, 220 – 226; 2016); Sorell (2005, 2 – 4); Kenny (2005); Hatfield (2005); Vermeir (2013, 53 – 57); Lærke (2013); Garber (2015). Also, Rorty (1984), although confusing the terminology, see note 2. Passmore (1965) proposes a more fine-grained differentiation of aims; his “polemical” and “problematic elucidatory” approaches cover fairly the philosophical and historical aims, respectively. Cf. Gracia (1992, 234 – 276). Some, notably Gueroult (1969), argues that the two aims are inseparable; this view is refuted by Frede (2022a).

although he was charged with psychologizing (cf. Schliesser 2019). So, one *aims at* historical truth if and only if one adopts GTRC.

Then, Mercer (2019, 532) writes: “a rational reconstructionist is someone who rejects the GTRC,” namely, does not care about historical truth. A methodology (of rational reconstruction) is contrasted with a purpose (for historical accuracy).² Again, Mercer calls those with the historical aim “contextualists,” applying a term of a method for a given purpose. But, despite the GTRC’s appearance as a methodological suggestion, the rule does not tell us how to proceed and by no means implies that the *social context* should be consulted. Apart from this terminological sloppiness, let me mention three serious problems.

(1.) Mercer’s distinction suggests we should call any historical study “contextualist,” regardless of whether it uses any context. Remember that “contextual factor” in these debates usually refers to something not philosophical but belonging to the broader cultural setting. Consider two example studies which would count as “contextualist” according to Mercer’s criteria, yet we would not call “contextualist” involving the cultural context. First, Mercer’s article seems to be a study on the *history* of methodology in the history of (early modern) philosophy; so it is supposed to be contextualist (using the GTRC). It appeals to the historiographical *debate* the article contributes to, especially the *works cited*. But this debate is *philosophical*, so it does not seem a contextual factor in the relevant sense (as the cultural setting). If “context” is used in such a broad sense to include even the relevant discussion, I doubt it is a helpful term for making distinctions. Every philosophical work contributing to a debate and citing other works without distortion would be a contextualist historical work. Perhaps Mercer’s account, which is intended to apply to the history of early modern philosophy, should not be extended to the history of historiography (although I see no reason for this restriction).

Yet, consider Mercer’s example. Della Rocca, having an “interest in contemporary philosophy,” aims to show the coherence of Spinoza’s system and explains everything in Spinoza in light of an “overarching principle”; but he still disavows distorting Spinoza (Mercer 2019, 531 – 532). Three comments:

(A.) The putative aim of Della Rocca to reconstruct “the real Spinoza” in itself renders him a contextualist, according to Mercer, despite the lack of appeal to any

² This confusion seems to originate with Rorty (1984, 54): “If we picture discussion of great dead philosophers as alternating between historical reconstruction, which depends on obeying Skinner’s maxim, and rational reconstruction, which depends on ignoring it, there need be no conflict between the two.” Skinner’s maxim is equivalent to Mercer’s constraint. Rorty (1984, 63 – 64) labels “historical reconstruction” as “constructivist.”

contextual factor.³ So, again, Mercer says “contextualist” and means “historical.” Nonetheless, (B.) Della Rocca’s aim is explicitly philosophical.⁴ So, according to Mercer’s criterion, he should be categorized as a reconstructivist (due to his philosophical aim) or perhaps both it and a contextualist (due to his putative aim for historical accuracy). Or perhaps (C.) Della Rocca’s account does not fit the suggested dichotomy: his emphasis on coherence and a single principle makes his approach a “systematic interpretation,” as Nelson (2013) calls it.⁵

(2.) It is equally odd to call all philosophical aims in dealing with past philosophy “rational reconstruction.” Yet, on a certain understanding of rational reconstruction, arguably, it is involved in any engagement in past philosophy. As Della Rocca (2015, 530) puts it, “*any* interpretation – perhaps short of reproducing the text verbatim, and perhaps not even then – is going to be a rational reconstruction in trying to highlight or make explicit what the text does not make explicit” (Cf. Gracia 1992, 48 – 51, 64 – 86; Kenny 2005, 20).

(3.) The dichotomy of aims does not match the putative dichotomy of methods. Instead, one can pair one’s philosophical purpose with both a reconstructivist and a contextualist method. Mercer provides many examples of philosophers who have “converted” to take historical context seriously in their philosophical engagement with past authors. It seems equally possible to reconstruct past philosophical views and arguments, especially when they are preserved in a scattered way. For example, consider the whole area of Pre-Socratics, most of the Hellenistic philosophy (e.g., Frede 2022a, 58, 85 – 86), or from modernity, the metaphysics of Leibniz to be gathered from different writings (e.g., Blank 2022), to name just three. In such cases, rational reconstruction might be the way to achieve a view that “the figures would recognize as their own” to comply with GTRC. While reconstruction is less required for early modern

³ Della Rocca (2008) appeals to the principle of sufficient reason as a primary interpretive principle of Spinoza’s *Ethics* and other writings. As he claims in reply to his critics, he aimed at understanding the real Spinoza rather than a mere rational reconstruction devoid of historical accuracy (Della Rocca 2015, 524). Mercer accepts this claim to historical accuracy at face value and suggests it is merely the difference in the context that distinguishes Della Rocca’s approach from that of others (Mercer 2019, 532). However, it is unclear what kind of *context* the principle of sufficient reason is. In other words, Mercer begs the question: the fact that a reconstruction aims at being non-distortive of a view (“to get things right”) does not make the applied interpretive principles contextual factors as it is used in relation to “contextualist history of philosophy.” Arguing about the principle of sufficient reason seems narrowly philosophical. Moreover, Della Rocca (2015, 532 – 533) specifies his interest as philosophical: bringing Spinoza’s philosophizing to the fore to criticize contemporary philosophy. Mercer fails to notice this.

⁴ See note 3.

⁵ Skinner (1969, 16 – 22; 2002b, 67 – 70) dismisses such an approach as “the mythology of coherence.” Catana (2013) highlights the shortcomings of systematic (and problem-based) histories of philosophy, criticizing this approach as creating “the illusion of past philosophy as an autonomous and inward-looking enterprise” (2013, 129), with which Garber (2015) agrees.

authors, this is due to the contingency that the textual evidence for their views is substantial. In general, differences in the nature of textual evidence for a period or author necessitates different methodologies. However, since most of what the relevant parties (including Mercer) in the historiographical debate say applies to the history of philosophy on a general, theoretical level, I aim to consider what is common in studies of philosophies in different periods.

Returning to terminology: while it is confusing, the meaning is clear. There is a significant difference between philosophical aims and the aim for historical truth. But the terminological confusion can lead to fruitless discussions, which should be avoided by separating the question of method from that of purpose and labelling the main divide between “philosophical history of philosophy” and “historical history of philosophy” (Frede 2022a). Then, we could ask methodological questions concerning each pursuit. For example, what context should we consider, given the aim of finding a philosophically appealing argument in a past author’s text? Or, with the purpose of a historically accurate interpretation of a past author’s philosophical view, what context should we consider? My point is that the two questions are different. The following considerations relate to the latter question in response to Mercer’s contextualism.

II. Mercer’s Contextualism

Mercer’s account of contextualist history of philosophy is inadequate or at least incomplete. First, she provides a minimalist criterion to count an approach as historical or “contextual”: the aim of getting things right (GTRC) or historically accurate. This is fine but fairly obvious: what else would be the target of a historian as a historian than historical truth? Then, she proposes that accuracy will inevitably involve an appeal to the historical *context* of the philosopher under study. This also seems plausible, although it highly depends on the type of context. We get many examples (Mercer 2019, 540): a wider range of texts of an author than the canonical work (like works of Spinoza besides the *Ethics*); the political conversations of the age; the social-political situation of the country; theological discussions (e.g., Jewish theology in case of Spinoza); and the list could be continued with any aspect of culture. Any of these contextual factors might prove relevant in a given study. But how should we decide which ones are important for a particular research and which could be ignored or given less weight? Even though Mercer (2019, 532) considers this question important, she does not provide a clear answer. She says the context should fit our competencies (2019, 541 – 543). Is this a valuable recommendation? I want to raise two problems: one is minor, but the other comes to the heart of the matter.

The minor problem concerns the recommendation to choose topics based on competencies. This seems a trivial suggestion. As I lack knowledge of the Syrian language, studying philosophers whose treatises are only in Syrian would be outrageous. But were I very interested in these views, could I not learn Syrian? Of course, this would be inefficient. It would be much less effort to study those subjects for which I lack no competence (or lack very little) and leave the Syrian philosopher to someone reading Syrian. But the point is that *theoretically* a historian's current competencies are not decisive. If a study requires a particular competence, one must have it to complete the study. Should one lack it before starting the study, one can develop it for this specific case. Indeed, much of historical research involves acquiring new competencies, like knowledge about the historical and cultural background of the studied philosopher (or even Syrian). Perhaps Mercer meant nothing but practical advice. However, the "maximizing of understanding," which she bases on this advice, tells against mere practicality.

My second point is more pressing. Besides the fit to competencies, Mercer suggests considering those contextual factors that *lead to a better understanding* of the philosophical view. In fact, she talks about "maximizing our understanding" (2019, 530 – 531, 540 – 543). On the one hand, she appears permissive ("ecumenic") about what counts as such. She allows somebody to interpret Spinoza's *Ethics* on certain assumptions about Spinoza's rationality, like Della Rocca (see above, esp. note 3). But Mercer (2019, 542 – 543) takes it as *equally* acceptable to interpret the same work, the *Ethics*, in the ethical-political context of its time, as she takes Garber to suggest.⁶ On the other hand, she seems to propose specific research programs invoking debates in Jewish law at the time, Dutch kabbalists, and so on, tantamount to saying that appeal to maximally specific (or as much as available) historical context would be ideal. Which one is her recommendation? To be maximally permissive in the selection of the relevant context, "anything goes" (or anything that has a *prima facie* relevance), or aim for comprehensiveness without allowing selection (at least ideally)? Either way, the proposal is inadequate.

Suppose she thinks the selection does not matter; each way, one can provide exciting readings; she says this for Spinoza. But the cited interpretations (Garber's and Della Rocca's) admittedly appear *incompatible*, at least on some level (Mercer 2019, 531).⁷ Saying that Spinoza's *Ethics* can be described and philosophically *explained*

⁶ Garber (2015, 508, 519 – 520) indeed denounces Della Rocca's interpretation for its emphasis on metaphysics at the expense of not giving due weight to Spinoza's political and ethical motivations. The same worry is expressed by a reviewer of Della Rocca (2008). See LeBuffe (2009).

⁷ Della Rocca (2008); Garber (2015); Della Rocca (2015). What is important is how the motivations of Spinoza are identified and explained and how much a single principle and a system are stressed (by Della Rocca) in the interpretation (even neglecting evidence unfitting to the system).

without recourse to Spinoza's ethical goals embedded in his social context (Della Rocca) is at odds with saying it cannot (Garber). The two conflicting explanations (of the same texts) will appeal to different reasons, both of which cannot be *the real ones*, namely, equally correct. Crucially, this follows from Mercer's starting point. If the historian should get it right (*viz.*, the interpretation and the historical explanation), there must be *the right interpretation* and historical truth that the interpreters aim at (cf. Glock 2008, 886; Schmaltz 2022, 31 – 32). This does not mean, however, that we should expect definite interpretations or the impossibility of unresolved interpretation issues. Yet, in general, there are more and less plausible, and hence more and less correct interpretations, allowing for an approach to the historical truth (e.g., Gracia 1992, 211 – 219). The historical truth cannot include two contradictory interpretations unless the difference is a matter of detail or generality. But in our example, we supposed incompatibility, which is admitted by Mercer, so at least one of the two incompatible interpretations must be incorrect. Since the differences in the interpretations are supposed to depend on *which contextual factors are selected* as relevant (Mercer 2019, 530),⁸ to decide which one is the more plausible, the contextual factors required must be determined. Thus, we need criteria for selecting the relevant contextual factors and prioritizing them in each case. This, as far as I see, Mercer does not supply. For, the personal skillset criterion is subjective, practically trivial, and at most, it orients the *discovery* by setting the research topics but does not determine what context will be relevant to the *explanation*.

Probably she thinks the correct interpretation includes *all the prima facie* relevant historical contextual factors. Thus, all other accounts that include only a few can be partially correct. The incoherence of two partial interpretations is perhaps apparent and resolved by considering more context. Maximizing understanding seems to lead to maximizing the scope of the relevant context. Thus, a complete understanding of a philosophical view would probably involve a full understanding of (at least some local) history. There are at least two problems with this. First, history of philosophy collapses into general history and ceases to be a distinct field of study. This repeats the classic dichotomy: history of philosophy either collapses into philosophy ("reconstructivist" approach) or history (maximal understanding approach) (cf. Mandelbaum 1965, 47 – 50, 62 – 63; Zarka 2005, 154 – 155). An unapologetic account of the history of philosophy should make it an independent discipline devoid of philosophical concern (Lærke 2013, 8 – 10; Vermeir 2013, 57; Frede 2022a, 18, 119, 123 – 125; Skinner 2002a, 52 – 53; cf. Passmore 1965, 15 – 18, 27 – 30). This implies, however, that there should be no concern for maximal historical understanding either. Second, getting a complete understanding using the entire history is an impossible task (e.g., Rorty et al. 1984, 9).

⁸ Now I ignore that Della Rocca's principle of interpretation is not a contextual factor, see note 3.

III. Settling the Context: Internal History of Philosophy

To save the contextualist history of philosophy in a way that is neither arbitrary (anything goes) nor maximalist (collapsing into general history), we need a criterion to prioritize the factors for interpretation. I suggest the most relevant (viz. philosophical) aspects should define an *internal history of philosophy*, also allowing contextual factors. I proceed considering Michael Frede's account of history of philosophy (Frede 1987; 1988; 2022a; 2022b), especially what he says about the *explananda* and how an *explanation* should look. Through this, we get a criterion for judging interpretations and a clearer view of the goal of history of philosophy.⁹

Frede maintains that history of philosophy is a discipline in its own right, aiming to attain historical truth about the past of philosophy constituted by the events and actions related to philosophical activity (Frede 1987, xiii; 1988; 2022a, 9 – 10, 47 – 48, 67 – 75, *passim*; cf. Gracia 1992, 42 – 55). So, he proceeds from two premises: first, there is an identifiable rational enterprise – philosophy – which changes through time in the different philosophers' different philosophical activities (Frede 1988, 671; 2022a, 28 – 29, 33, 46, 49 – 52, 79 – 80, 95 – 97, 107, 112; cf. Skinner 2002a, 31 – 40, 51 – 52; Normore 2016, 30 – 33, 38 – 41).¹⁰ Second, history of philosophy is the discipline to recover the historical truth about this changing philosophical activity. Thus, it has a *historical aim* (as described at the beginning of the paper) of understanding a *specific history*, the history of philosophy (Frede 1987, x, xxiii – xxv; 1988, 666 – 670; 2022a, 10, 16, 18, 44 – 46, *passim*). Both assumptions have to be clarified. First, how can the object of history of philosophy be delimited – namely, what counts as philosophical activity – second, what are the discipline's specific historical facts and explanatory patterns? With answers to both questions, we will have an account of internal history of philosophy.

To delimit the object of history of philosophy – what counts as philosophy – there are two different ways (ignoring external criteria like institutional affiliation, see Collins 1998; cf. Normore 2016, 38 – 39). First, one might proceed from

⁹ Other accounts of history of philosophy, similar to Frede's, invoke an internal history: notably, Mandelbaum (1965; 1976); Lærke (2013); Vermeir (2013); Normore (2016); Passmore (1965, 27 – 30); Hatfield (2005, 103 – 111). I base my comments on Frede (but comment on significant differences) for three reasons. First, it is systematic and general compared to the alternatives; second, it predates most accounts (except Mandelbaum and Passmore, from whom Frede seems to gather certain ideas); third, Frede's view is not much acknowledged, especially in early modernist reflections. Catana (2013) equates internal history of philosophy with systematic reconstruction without endorsing such historiography; cf. note 23.

¹⁰ Mandelbaum (1965, 44 – 46, 49, 52 – 54, 57 – 62) clarifies how a specific history depends on the identity of its object, a continuously changing human activity, or one consisting of discontinuous events where influences can be established.

a definition of philosophy and use it to determine which texts of past writers fall under it. Since this approach naturally appeals to one's definition – which likely has alternatives – this leads to retrospective history of philosophy like Hegel's.¹¹ However, the retrospective approach has serious shortcomings. I mention just two: it can only fit historical data by being highly selective, that is, it does not fit the data (Frede 2022a, 15 – 16, 36 – 43, 70 – 71; Passmore 1965, 22 – 27); it must be rewritten whenever the chosen view of philosophy gets outdated (Frede 2022a, 75). To avoid this, we should take the change in the conception of philosophy over time seriously. Instead of a fixed definition, we should appeal to a time-dependent criterion of what is philosophical. This has two aspects: (1.) it should determine if a person is a philosopher and a text is philosophical, and (2.) if a particular reasoning counts as philosophical.

(1.) Frede suggests two alternative quasi-empirical approaches starting from a preliminary idea of what philosophy is and tracing the change of the conception within history (Frede 2022a, 62 – 63, 70 – 75). First, we can proceed from our philosophical activities and retrospectively add anything separated once from philosophy when it was split. For example, when physics became autonomous, natural philosophy lost its place in philosophy, so it started not being conceived as part of philosophy. Yet, before this time, it was an integral part of philosophy, so the historian should consider it so. Second, start with an uncontested philosopher's conception of philosophy, like Plato's or Kant's, include whatever their conception dictates, and trace the changes in both directions (in the same way as above): back in time to pre-Socratics or pre-Kantians, and advance in time until the present.¹² Both approaches give a practically viable yet non-arbitrary identification of philosophical texts and problems for each epoch.¹³

¹¹ The definition might be revisionary, and the account will be ideological, preferring certain kinds of philosophizing. This is what Rorty (1984, 56 – 61) calls *Geistesgeschichte*.

¹² Mandelbaum (1965, 56 – 57) suggests the same approach. See Barnes (2022, 197 – 199) for problems with Frede's proposal. Cf. also Kristeller (1964, 5 – 6). Later, Mandelbaum (1976, 722 – 729, 735 – 740) suggests a more substantive delimitation of what counts as philosophical: whatever problems philosophers usually deal with (stemming from issues with the science and culture of the time) in an *argumentative* manner. Similarly, Glock (2008, 872 – 873) emphasizes that philosophy deals with abstract and fundamental problems in an *a priori* way to organize what is known in a *coherent* way. Thus, whatever issues arise in philosophy, the crucial aspect of philosophical practice is its *rationality*, just as Frede argues.

¹³ Rorty (1984, 64 – 66) criticizes a parody of such an approach. I say parody, for he ignores that it considers changes in what counts as philosophical; thus, his critique can be dismissed.

(2.) For the rationality of the philosophical enterprise, let me quote Frede:

They [philosophers] have certain standards as to what counts as an adequate reason. There is a state of the art which is defined by the conception of the discipline, the accepted ways of pursuing it, the questions which are regarded as philosophical, the answers which are regarded as acceptable; though they may not be shared by all, they are the answers one can adopt and try to defend without undermining one's claim to philosophical competence. The state of the art, moreover, is defined by standards as to what kind of argument is acceptable or not. It is the concrete form of the enterprise philosophers are engaged in at a certain time. To say that it is an ongoing enterprise is just to say that there have been others who have been engaged in the same enterprise by engaging in the same activities, and that present philosophers continue the work of their predecessors trying to improve on what they did and thus advancing the state of the art (Frede 2022a, 51, cf. 101 – 104).

According to Frede, we can posit *a state of the art of philosophy at a time*. This serves, first, as a background against which philosophers' practices should be considered and evaluated. Second, it delimits what counts as philosophical at that time (Frede 2022a, 63 – 65; cf. Passmore 1965, 9 – 11; Skinner 2002a, 37 – 38; Hatfield 2005, 91 – 92; Normore 2016, 40 – 42) and the subject of change the historian is interested in. Based on Mandelbaum (1976, 737 – 738), we can add that there are, presumably, several intellectual environments at any time (different schools, countries, and university departments) which might use different philosophical standards. So, the state of the art of philosophy seems locally diversified.¹⁴ Considering the question of explanation, we will see that this criterion of philosophical rationality (based on the state of the art at a time) defines internal history of philosophy (Frede 2022a, 76 – 84).¹⁵

Having delimited the object of history of philosophy, we can turn to the issue of explanation (Frede 1987, xi – xviii; 1988, 669 – 672; 2022a, 63 – 64, 77 – 82, 92 – 104, 108, 120 – 121; summarized by Kenny 2005, 21 – 22; for an incisive critique, see Barnes 2022, 207 – 212; also Menn 2023). Frede suggests that the structure of the basic facts in history of philosophy is as follows: a *philosopher S at a certain time* (in a given historical context) *holds* (and expresses) *a philosophical view that p, for their*

¹⁴ Usually, the different intellectual environments have interconnections, and individuals in one environment can debate with those in another. This makes it appropriate to consider such a web of environments as a single state of the art, although internally diversified.

¹⁵ Compare Lakatos (1971), who takes each rationality or demarcation criterion for science as entailing a rational reconstruction of the history of science, rendering what counts as rational according to the criterion as internal history and what is irrational as external history.

*expressed philosophical reasons that q, r, and s.*¹⁶ The historian must first establish such facts based primarily on the writings of S (or when it is unavailable, based on reports on S's views) as historical evidence.¹⁷ This is already a historical reconstruction, or exegesis, as Mash (1987, 192 – 193) calls it (cf. Hatfield 2005, 94; Barnes 2022, 221 – 223). I will return to the import of this point.

The following task for the historian is crucial: to evaluate if the reasons of S to hold p – namely, q, r, and s – are indeed good reasons to hold p; since understanding requires the *reason why* S held p. (i) If they constitute a good reason in our terms, we have a *purely philosophical* account. If they are not good (enough) reasons for us as they are, on the basis of S's account, we might be able to reconstruct a plausible philosophical reasoning (viz., a rational reconstruction based on textual evidence) that provides a good reason to hold p. Importantly, this reconstruction might involve non-textual standards of interpretation (Kaukua and Lähteenmäki 2010) where we can assume our predecessors thought the same as we do.

If a good reason cannot be found,¹⁸ (ii) S's reasons might be good enough in the past philosophical context, according to the state of the art of philosophy then. In such a case, the historian must explain why those reasons looked adequate for the philosophers of that time.¹⁹ That is, she needs to explain how and why the *philosophical context* (e.g., what counts as adequate philosophical reasoning) changed. This task might require

¹⁶ Frede (1987, x – xi, xiii – xiv; 2022a, 109 – 112) clarifies that only historically significant or relevant past facts enter into the history of philosophy. Cf. Vermeir (2013). Passmore (1965, 27 – 30) takes the main activity of philosophers to attempt to solve philosophical problems. Hatfield (2005, 104 – 105) emphasizes that philosophers usually had larger projects as aims (e.g., Descartes to found a new physics), in the context of which certain problems arose for them. Thus, it seems inevitable to identify these larger projects as a study in itself and to enable studying the philosopher's attempt to solve problems in the context of larger projects. Cf. Garber (2005, 139 – 144).

¹⁷ Lærke (2013, 9, 14 – 15) contests this (also Menn 2023), arguing that philosophical practice *occurs* in writing, so the text is just the historical reality, not a representation of it. Even if modern philosophy is done totally in writing, there are obvious ancient exceptions, like Socrates, Pyrrho, or Epictetus, who did not write anything. And there are traditions, like early Stoicism or Epicurus, where we must be content with testimonial reports of philosophers' views, often unsympathetic, for their reconstructions, see Frede (2022a, 85 – 86). In modernity, too, exceptions exist, like the lectures of Hegel. And there are complicated cases when a philosopher does not express their own view directly, like Plato in his dialogues. On these points, see also Skinner (1969, 32 – 34, 48; 2002a, 42 – 43; 2002b, 80 – 81; 2002c, 118 – 120); Gracia (1992, 259 – 261). Moreover, we must remember that our texts are already scholarly *reconstructions* (mainly, but not only, ancient texts), often with their own history. On this aspect, see Mann's excellent article (1996), agreeing with Frede's approach. Cf. Gracia (1992, 187 – 222).

¹⁸ In practice, likely, we will never stop at step (i) with our philosophical standards, especially if the historical view is farther removed from us.

¹⁹ Lærke (2013, 16 – 23) starts here, emphasizing the philosophical debate (in a cluster of texts) as the primary (internal) contextual factor settling the meaning of a text. Also, Hatfield (2005, 103 – 106) stresses the predecessors and the audience of the studied author and the larger non-philosophical cultural context of science, theology, and the like. Cf. Frede (2022a, 96, 117 – 118); Skinner (1969, 32 – 35, 46 – 49; 2002b, 80 – 82; 2002c, 115 – 118).

the study of conceptual frameworks or predecessors' doctrines: still a philosophical work, though embedded in the past context. The enquiry is bound by S's philosophical reasons, q, r, s. So the explanation appeals to contextual factors related to the given "discrepancy" that renders S's reasons not good in our terms.

(iii) Whenever the reasons are not good to us or S's philosophical milieu, they might be flawed in many ways. For example, S's reasoning might depend on a logical fallacy or some assumptions (not accepted by us), which could explain why S took her reasons to be good. Finally, the historical context (outside the philosophical environment) may explain why S and her contemporaries could think S's reasons are good, for example, because everyone at the time had certain assumptions (like religious beliefs). So, this explanation phase is still bound by S's philosophical reasons, q, r, s.

A coherent account needs many questions to be answered. For example, (1.) what counts as good philosophical reasoning for us? (2.) for philosophers at the time of S, how can we evaluate them? or (3.) how can we identify S's reasons in their terms? As noted, Frede supposes a *state of the art of philosophy* at any given time, including ours, which determines what reasoning is good then. So both (1.) and (2.) can be decided. However, it is not Frede's concern how to do it, so he suggests (1987, xv; 2022a, 46, 56 – 62, 65; cf. Passmore 1965, 29 – 30) (1.) belongs to philosophical competence, (3.) to historical competence, and (2.) both to historical and philosophical competence.

While this seems correct, there is more to say about how historical competence is to be applied in taking past philosophers on their own terms: both identifying their reasons (question (3.)) and assessing them (question (2.)). That is, we should specify what is involved in the historical reconstruction of Frede's *basic facts*. He acknowledges that historical competence includes knowledge of the *language* at the time: word meanings, more specifically, the philosophical language of the time or the given philosopher. Moreover, the historian must have a broad knowledge of *philosophical controversies* and pertinent problems in the *wider culture* that could induce philosophical reflection (like sciences, religion, theology, or social institutions).²⁰ All these examples of "knowledge of the past culture" belong to historical competence. It is crucial, however, that in determining the basic facts (S held p for reasons q, r, s), such factors are used.²¹ In other words,

²⁰ See, for example, Mandelbaum (1965, 63 – 65), who emphasizes the differences in how science, religion, or politics affect philosophy. Garber (2005, 138 – 142) even claims that philosophy was inseparable from science and theology in the Early Modern period. Mandelbaum (1976, 736 – 737) considers the possibility that the philosopher's biography is relevant for the internal history of philosophy, as it may explain certain reasoning of the philosopher.

²¹ Frede's appeal to competence differs from Mercer's; for it is a prerequisite for identifying the explananda but does not lead to correct interpretations. So it is needed for discovery without determining explanation.

determining the correct meaning of a text and the philosopher's view already appeals to contextual factors beyond the text itself (Frede 2022a, 86 – 91).²²

One might think the appeal to the context in reconstructing “basic facts” compromises internality. Two considerations. First, some aspects are obviously needed to understand texts, especially the language, so if an appeal to them compromised internal history, it would be impossible. Second, arguably, the very linguistic context of the given text is essential in settling its meaning, so inevitable in interpreting it. The linguistic context is the *philosophical controversy* to which S contributes. This controversy and debate also clarify the philosophical language, more specifically, as Lærke suggests (2013, 17 – 22; cf. note 19; Frede 2022a, 91 – 92, 96, 117 – 118; Passmore 1965, 28 – 29), who emphasizes to consider the actual *debate* in which the given view and reasons for it had been put forward, perhaps as an answer to a question in the debate. Such debates are often narrowly philosophical, but the philosophical reflection on another discipline's domain usually involves the other cultural field. Thus, “the past philosopher's own terms” should be gathered mainly from the relevant debate, evidence constituted by a cluster of texts of the author and other participants. This applies, especially for the expressed view and its reasons (p, q, r, s above), while “philosophical standards” should be evaluated using a larger set of texts. Thus, it seems the contextual factors in determining the basic facts will overlap with those required to explain them, which will include mainly the philosophical context of the time (the debates and the state of the art). As Zarka (2005, 149, 159) says succinctly, the context must also be reconstructed, partly based on the exact text it is the context of. Again, the external context will be needed when the philosophical view reflects on cultural facts. That is, just as in the explanation also in the preceding historical reconstruction, there is a guiding principle when an appeal to external factors is unproblematic for internal history. As Glock (2008, 885) says, it is clear that “those aspects of the context which the author herself assumes to be familiar to readers or which concern tacit assumptions of her reasoning are more important than the economic conditions of the text's production.”

The upshot of Frede's account is (i) to prioritize philosophical reasons, both ours and especially those in the philosopher's own terms, and turn to the cultural context only when philosophical accounts give no acceptable explanation. But then, too, (ii) we should appeal to those contextual factors that explain the inadequacy of the philosophical reasons we are left with in attempting a purely philosophical explanation. That is, we should identify

²² Thus, Copenhaver (2020, 182 – 183) misrepresents Frede's view. So, a rational reconstruction not considering the past philosophical context (meaning, controversies) is a non-starter, so it cannot be legitimately taken as an adequate historical method. Goldenbaum (2013) gives a useful description of the exegetical method and its reliance on context; cf. Kristeller (1964).

the point of discrepancy in the philosophical account and use the contextual factors needed to eliminate it until we reach an adequate explanation of the facts.²³ True, (iii) anything beyond “internal history of philosophy” can contribute to our understanding of the given philosopher S and that S adopted view p for reasons q, r, s. But that understanding will be external to history of philosophy in the sense that without it, we still have sufficient explanation to constitute a history of philosophy.²⁴ So, maximized understanding of the fact is not the same as the understanding in history of philosophy.

Conclusion

Returning to Mercer: I suggest we get things right in the history of philosophy not by any contextualist approach, not even appealing to every possible context, but by an internal history selecting the relevant context as Frede and others suggest. First and foremost, we should explain in terms of philosophical reasons. Then, if it does not work, we should identify the point at which the explanation fails and select the contextual factors that help explain the discrepancy. Provided this approach ends somewhere with an adequate explanation, contextual factors we have not appealed to will likely remain. Then, these will remain outside the history of philosophy, although they can contribute to our understanding of the fact we started with (our philosopher’s view). However, this understanding need not be considered within history of philosophy.

Hence, the contextual factors one must appeal to will vary case by case, so it is impossible to know or list them before doing the historical study (cf. Hatfield 2005, 104 – 105). This is a further reason for doubting the usefulness of Mercer’s suggestion of “choosing research topics based on our competencies.” It is not the case that if I turn to Spinoza with competence in 17th-century Jewish law, I will be able to get Spinoza right. It may turn out to be the case. But it more likely happens that one turns to Spinoza and

²³ Critiques of internal history of philosophy often construe internality narrowly. Notably, Catana (2013, esp. 120 – 130) emphasizes the concept of *system*, taking what is internal to systems of philosophy – principles and doctrines derived from them – as internal to history of philosophy, whereas he takes biographical, psychological, social, political, and similar factors as external. He convincingly traces the system concept in the historiography of philosophy to the eighteenth century (Brucker and Brandis) and shows that later “histories” of philosophy that Mercer calls “reconstructivist” – with a philosophical aim – appear to apply the system concept. However, he does not find a place for disciplines other than philosophy, namely the sciences or theology, so he takes the system concept and so internality to be useless in historiography, see Catana (2013, 126, 129 – 133). His critique, thus, does not apply to accounts that include such factors within internal history: those that I have been considering. Indeed, his suggestion to appeal to these contexts seems to be close to the account I have given. Copenhaver (2020, 182 – 183) only dismisses the narrowly internalist position.

²⁴ That is, “the role played in the development of Philosophy by the reasons and considerations the giving and taking of which constitute much of Philosophical practice” (Normore 2016, 39). Cf. Gracia (1992, 89).

finds some curious reasoning where Spinoza appeals to some utterly unphilosophical thought for us and in Spinoza's time. And by delving into Jewish law in the 17th century (or activating one's knowledge about this), one realizes that a given debate in that context can explain Spinoza's curious appeal. This success may lead one to study this specific context more thoroughly, leading to more rewards within the Spinoza scholarship.²⁵

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²⁵ See the example of Goldenbaum (2013).

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