

A Letter to a Graduate Student Thinking of Studying the History of Philosophy

There can really be only one general piece of advice for someone considering what part of philosophy to specialize in: do what you love. The road is too long and hard to do anything else. But what if, like many philosophers, you love lots of different parts of the field? Then it is perhaps not inappropriate to think about what will be good for you in the long run. In my view, for philosophers with some inclination toward the history of the discipline, the best specialization at the start of one's career is historical.

Certainly, if you are ever going to take up this sort of serious engagement with an historical period, you should do it now, at the start, when learning languages is easiest and you have the time and energy for it, and when you have a ready and willing guide in the form of a thesis advisor. The choice to go down this path is not a lifetime commitment. Many of the most original and influential philosophers of modern times devoted significant parts of their early careers to history, before turning to developing their own ideas. A list just off the top of my head includes Anscombe, Geach, Ryle, Russell, Bernard Williams, Korsgaard, Foot, Mackie, Frankfurt, Hursthouse, Sellars, Strawson (both), Armstrong, and Nussbaum.

The discipline of philosophy benefits from a serious, sustained engagement with its history. Most of the interesting, important work in philosophy is not being done right now, at this precise instant in time, but lies more or less hidden in the past, waiting to be uncovered. Philosophers who limit themselves to the present restrict their horizons to whatever happens to be the latest fashion, and deprive themselves of a vast sea of conceptual resources.

If you think you have original philosophical thoughts in you, they can wait – indeed, it's better to let them wait until you've had the chance to develop the philosophical breadth and depth to make the most of them. To be sure, plenty of philosophers have done important original work in their 20s and early 30s, but it is a commonplace in the profession that one does not usually hit one's full philosophical stride until later.

Despite the above list of names, many philosophers today are presentists – they think that the only philosophy worth reading has been written in the last 100 years, if not the last 30 years. This attitude is hard to justify. The historical record shows that philosophy – unlike science and math – does not develop in steady, linear fashion. Perhaps the very best historical era ever came at the very start, in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. If that was not it, then one has to wait some 1600 years, for the century from Aquinas to Oresme, (Who's Oresme?, you may ask. Exactly.) or wait 2000 years, for Descartes through Kant. I'm leaving out important figures, of course, but also many quite fallow periods, even in modern times. *Maybe* subsequent generations will judge 2011 and environs as the highpoint up until now of the whole history of philosophy, but I wouldn't bet on it. Every generation of philosophers has been equally prepossessed by its own ideas.

Of course, I am no more capable than others of judging my own times, but certainly I am not alone in feeling some amount of dissatisfaction with the way philosophy looks today. Tyler Burge nicely expresses my own worries when he remarks, in the preface to his recent book, that “if philosophy is not to slide toward irrelevance and become a puzzle-game-playing discipline, good mainly for teaching the young to think clearly, some central parts of philosophy must broaden their horizons.” Burge mainly has in mind science as a broadening influence; I think the history of philosophy can play a similar role. Although a background in the history of the subject is obviously not a prerequisite for doing deep and original work, it helps, and I fear the discipline's present collective neglect of its past contributes to its often insular character.

Admittedly, if you attend a random history talk at the APA, it is likely to be less

philosophically interesting than the average non-historical talk. This, however, has nothing to do with the field itself – just read the historical work of any of the above-mentioned figures to see how interesting the history of the subject can be. If work in the history of philosophy today seems often uninteresting, that is simply a testimony to its relative neglect within our discipline. This, however, should be seen as an opportunity. Young philosophers who combine historical training with philosophical talent are rare indeed, and they get noticed.

As you will already have discovered, philosophy is a notoriously intimidating discipline, and many find that its sheer unpleasantness causes them to have second thoughts about their career choice. If this resonates with you, then you have still further reason to consider history. We specialize not in tearing philosophers down, but in building them up. Our prime interpretive principle is charity. We too, of course, have our disputes. But there are few enough of us, and so much work to be done, that our first inclination is to cheer for each other, rather than go on the attack.

What about more practical questions? First and foremost, it is both easier to get into a good PhD program if you focus on history, and easier to get a job. Almost every PhD program wants graduate students in history, and every department, no matter how small, needs faculty to teach the historical core. There are, however, many fewer candidates for these positions. Even the very top PhD programs in the history of philosophy receive only a handful of candidates seeking to study in those areas, and it is not unusual for there to be roughly as many jobs in the history of philosophy as there are plausible candidates.

Second, as I said before, there really is no obstacle to changing one's area of research down the road. If you write a history dissertation, then you will, almost certainly, have to get a job advertised in that area. No matter how brilliant an epistemologist (say) you may be, you cannot get an entry-level position in epistemology without writing a dissertation in that area. But, once you have a position, although you may have long-term teaching obligations in the area you were hired in, you have no long-term research obligations. Your new colleagues will expect you to publish what you can from your dissertation, and to build on that expertise in the years leading up to tenure. But it happens all the time that philosophers drift from one area of research to another, and no one is bothered by this. Indeed, your new colleagues are likely to be impressed and pleased to see you branch out into other areas, and will regard you as an even better hire than they had supposed if you are able to do both historical and non-historical research.

Finally, as for languages, it is true that a PhD in the history of philosophy requires the ability to read philosophy in other languages. But this is not as hard as it may sound, and it is not too late to start. I have published several book-length translations of Latin texts, and yet my formal training in Latin consists in a one-year college course, taken my senior year of college. You don't need to speak the language, you don't need to write it, and in many cases the philosophical vocabulary is constant across the major European languages. Can you remember that *intellectus* means *intellect*, and *actus* means *act*? Then you can do this.



Bob Pasnau
Boulder