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SOME REMARKS ON CURRENT HISTORY OF ANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

For this first plenary conference of our network, the history of philosophy science team is presenting its “overview plus” of the current state of the discipline under fairly traditional headings. I should say right away therefore that the purpose of doing so is that of giving a fairly clear identification of each contribution’s starting point. The categories chosen are meant to be neither exclusive nor exhaustive – nor, indeed, evaluative.

I

Let me begin by noting that the history of philosophy of science has made tremendous progress over the last two decades. That there now exists an international scholarly society (called “HOPOS”) dedicated to work in this field with biennial conferences and a planned journal is even an institutional indicator of the progress made. But before we can ask “So where are we in our discipline?”, we must ask not only “What made this development possible?” but also “What precisely is it that has developed here?” Both of the preliminary questions have quick answers, but there are considerable complexities hiding behind their superficial plausibility.

One of the things that made the growth of history of philosophy of science possible is the ever-increasing distance of philosophy of science from its beginnings. While such a distance inevitably encourages disciplinary self-reflection in a historical vein, there is in the present case an additional poignancy which derives from the fact that, at least as remembered, analytical philosophy of science originally professed to care little about history. So we get the apparent dialectic that, with growing age, a once a- or even self-consciously un-historical discipline acquires historical consciousness. One may remark that this is hardly surprising nor in itself newsworthy, but this is not the only development to be taken note of.

Here I’m thinking of a change in methodological attitude that late 20th century philosophy of science prided itself on, a change sometimes characterised as a naturalistic turn or even a turn to scientific practice: either way it involves the self-conscious rejection of a priori reflection about grand philosophical themes related to science and instead demands detailed knowledge of current scientific theories and experimental practices. So if history of philosophy of science wants to partake in this change – which I presume – its practitioners must engross themselves also in history of science and details of past scientific practices in particular scientific

disciplines. And given the developments in history of science in turn, this typically involves, at a minimum, also an awareness, not only of developments internal to the scientific theorisings at issue, but also of the socio-political and cultural contexts of these theorisings.

A qualification is necessary here. The turn to details of first-order scientific theory and practice is demanded of history of philosophy of science to different degrees, namely, as appropriate to the cases at hand. In cases where the philosophies under consideration themselves concerned very general themes and were developed at arms length from scientific practice, extensive attention to details of the latter is less imperative than in cases where the philosopher in question was a practicing scientist. Parallel qualifications appear indicated concerning the consideration of the socio-political and cultural contexts of philosophies of science, but here the dynamic seems reversed: the greater their distance from scientific practice and the more general the topics and conclusion, the more such contextualising seems required to understand the presuppositions of these philosophies. Again it is difficult to generalise, but certain tendencies seem clear enough.

History of philosophy of science then, at least in its noblest intent, aspires to be an interdisciplinary undertaking to an even greater extent than current philosophy of science. It seeks to comprehend developments in the philosophy of science in relation both to the technical context of first-order scientific theorising and in relation the general socio-cultural context.

Note that I did not say “the development of philosophy of science”, for so far such grand narratives have not been not on the agenda. This is not to say that ideas of historical trajectories do not inform work in the history of philosophy of science, but it seems to me that its practitioners are too aware of the pitfall of reaching for views of the development of the philosophy of science *sub specie aeternitatis*. Their work concerns more or less extended episodes and considers them from a particular philosophical viewpoint—be that problem or programme-based.

II

Turning now to a brief and somewhat rough catalogue of work done in recent history of philosophy of science, I will draw some minor morals bearing on the taxonomic misgivings I alluded to earlier. I will then go on to offer some thoughts on why work in history of philosophy of science may be turned to philosophical gain.

Sticking to my brief for the 20th century and the analytic tradition, it is possible categorise the work done in terms of philosophical movements and periods and