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IS THERE A HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY?
SOME DIFFICULTIES AND SUGGESTIONS

ABSTRACT. Philosophy as a separate discipline is a rather new phenomenon. This presents problems for our understanding of what constitutes the history of philosophy. Past writers often approached their concerns from a multi-disciplinary perspective; thus to understand them we have to do more than answer a contemporary set of issues. To that end, I suggest we attend to Locke's advice on how to read a text. Following this advice may permit us to avoid several puzzles which result from misreading a text.

In addressing the theme of this conference, and in speaking to the title of my article, I will have the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in mind. I do not want to suggest that our discipline starts or stops in these centuries (we normally trace it back at least to the Greeks), although a great number of the issues and problems in twentieth century English-speaking philosophy have claimed this more recent lineage. In taking the centuries that I know best as my touchstone and example, I can illustrate the difficulties confronting attempts to examine our discipline historically.

WHAT WAS PHILOSOPHY IN THE TWO CENTURIES?

The notion of the history of philosophy is ambiguous. It may refer to written histories, to books attempting to trace the history of the discipline or subject-matter (or some portion of that history). It may also simply refer to the previous writers and issues identified by our term 'philosophy'. The phrase, 'the history of philosophy', may thus refer either to the past of the discipline or to books about that past. In both references, there is an initial difficulty of identifying the discipline or the subject matter. The very term 'discipline' – as in, 'the discipline of philosophy' – can be misleading since our discipline did not emerge as a separate and identifiable subject until relatively late. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one could not, for example, read for a degree in philosophy at Oxford University. One could study law, theology, some of the sciences (including medically related ones), and logic, but not philosophy. The term 'philosophy' was often linked with the term 'natural', as in 'natural philosophy', meaning science.

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The point about the referent of the term 'philosophy' can be illustrated by the reading lists in a little pamphlet published in 1730 by Daniel Waterland, *Advice to a Young Student, with a Method of Study for the Four First Years*. Waterland lays out a plan of reading for the university student, suggesting books to be read in each of the four years. He used three categories: philosophical, classical, and religious. Under 'philosophical' for the first year, he lists several books on arithmetic, Euclid's Geometry, a work on trigonometry, and one of the standard Aristotelian logics. For the second year, he lists more advanced mathematical works, two books on astronomy, an introduction to physics (by Keill), and the Cartesian work by Rohault on physics. Locke's *Essay* is also listed. The third year includes books on ethics and the law of nature, and several books on what we would view as geography. The fourth year just cites four books under the label 'philosophical': a work of metaphysics (by Baronius), Newton's *Opticks*, Gregory's work on astronomy, and a book on mathematics.¹

If we look up the term 'philosophy' in a popular reference work, Chambers' *Encyclopaedia*, published in 1728, the term is defined as "The Knowledge or Study of Nature and Morality, founded on Reason and Experience." Nothing especially 'philosophical' to our ears in that definition, save perhaps the inclusion of 'morality'. Most of his examples are from ancient authors, a favorite of the two centuries, Cicero, is frequently cited. Chambers does have separate articles on Greek sects, as well as on Cartesians and Newtonians. He also speaks of the corpuscular, mechanical and experimental philosophies. 'Philosophizing' is said to be "the act of considering some Object of our Knowledge; examining its Properties, and the Phaenomena it exhibits; enquiring into their Causes or Effects, and the Laws thereof: the whole conducted according to the Nature and Reason of Things". He then cites Newton's rules of philosophizing, indicating that it is *natural philosophy*, not *philosophy*, that he is describing. The first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (about 1776) repeats Chambers' definition of 'philosophy' as "the Knowledge or study of nature and morality, founded on reason and experience." The article directs the reader to entries on mechanism, optics, astronomy, logic and morals. Again, the only entries we might take to be philosophical are the ones on logic and morals. The article on moral philosophy is quite long. I have not had time to trace the source of the material there, but a quick glance suggests that it is at least borrowing from standard works, perhaps those