ABSTRACT. Serious work in history of philosophy requires doing something very difficult: conducting a hypothetical dialogue with dead philosophers. Is it worth devoting to it the time and energy required to do it well? Yes. Quite apart from the intrinsic interest of understanding the past, making progress toward solving philosophical problems requires a good grasp of the range of possible solutions to those problems and of the arguments which motivate alternative positions, a grasp we can only have if we understand well philosophy's past. Philosophers who concentrate too much on the present are apt to assume too simple a view of alternative theories and of important philosophical arguments. Ryle and Austin offer instructive examples of how it is possible to go wrong by ignoring or misrepresenting historical figures.

My aim here is to reflect on the nature of what I do and to consider whether it is worth doing. Not everyone will agree that the history of philosophy is worth bothering with. Philosophers, I find, often have towards historians of their subject a disdain matched only by that which creative writers often have for literary critics. Studying the systems of dead philosophers may be a fit occupation for apprentices, who have yet to learn their trade, or for others incapable of making any serious contribution to philosophy proper, but no philosopher worth his salt will want to spend much time conducting a dialogue with the dead. Consider the following words of Michael Scriven, contained in a generally sensible piece of advice to departments on how to increase their enrollments. In this passage Scriven is recommending the creation of a 'two-track' major,

one via problems courses... one via history courses... Of course, the history bears on the problems, but so do the problems bear on the history... and the fact remains that many students today won't take on that heavy history trip and you can't act as if all professional philosophers disagree with them... Some history will come in the back door of the problems courses—so be it. But don't be a slave to the fact that most of your faculty know a great deal about the history of philosophy and hence, (a) find it easy to teach, and (b) tend to rationalize its importance. Like the formal logic requirement, this is all-too-often a case of those who went through fraternity initiations... needing to justify the hardship— or their own idiosyncratic taste —by generalizing about its necessity. The test of a good major is that s/he does good philosophy, not good history of philosophy. Few great philosophers are noted for their work in the history of philosophy and many.
were deficient or disinterested in it. They were into the problems. Let it be at least a matter for investigation whether the history requirements are necessary; they certainly are a barrier (1977, p. 233)

Thus Professor Scriven. If he did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him, for otherwise it would be hard to find displayed in so short a space so many indefensible prejudices.

Is it really true, for example, that an undergraduate choosing to major in philosophy is typically embarking on a "heavy history trip"? Not in my experience. Typically the undergraduate major is required to take the standard two-semester or three-quarter survey of the history of philosophy from Thales to Kant, supplemented, perhaps, by similar surveys of 19th and 20th century philosophy. But at most institutions that do not have graduate programs, few advanced courses in particular figures or movements are available; where they are available, they are rarely required. Typically the undergraduate major takes mainly systematic or problem-oriented courses.

Is it really true that most faculty in philosophy departments know a great deal about the history of philosophy? Perhaps in some schools they do, but not in many – not if "knowing a great deal" about a subject implies having an extensive set of accurate and well-founded beliefs. How could they? What kind of training have most faculty had in the history of philosophy?

As undergraduates they will no doubt have had the standard survey courses, but we cannot assume that they will have learned much from that experience. When I went through that kind of course some twenty-five years ago, we read secondary accounts of Plato, Aristotle, etc., in a massive textbook. Now more attention is paid to primary sources. No one should be under any illusions about how much can be achieved in a course of that scope within the time constraints of one academic year. The undergraduate who knows Plato and Aristotle only from that kind of course will not know much about Plato and Aristotle.

As graduate students they will no doubt have taken some advanced seminars in Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, and perhaps one or more of the British empiricists. Here they will actually have read intensively the whole of some primary texts and been exposed to some fairly sophisticated secondary literature. But art is long, life is short, and they will not have read nearly enough to "know a great deal" about Plato, say, unless they happen to have chosen him as the subject of their dissertation. At best they will know one figure or movement really well.