ABSTRACT. While Curley argues that we need to know the history of philosophy so as not to avoid important alternatives to contemporary proposals, I argue that philosophy is an essentially historical enterprise. Unlike science, philosophy cannot forget its history. Not to know the history of philosophy is not to understand why the questions we seek to answer are worth answering or asking.

In his article, 'Dialogues with the Dead,' Edwin Curley argues that contemporary philosophers have neglected the importance of doing the history of philosophy to doing philosophy. He points out, further, that when referring to the history of philosophy, many contemporary philosophers seem to be less concerned with accurately portraying the positions they discuss than with finding support for their own positions. He describes them as “setting up” their own views as the only reasonable alternative to the historical positions they have “caricatured.”

In essence, Curley’s argument is that to do good philosophy we ought to interrogate as many philosophers as possible, so as not to neglect important alternatives. We want a view that can withstand the attack of good philosophers who disagree with us. In order to accomplish this it is a mistake to question only those philosophers who are alive. Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant, and others have more to offer than do many of our contemporaries. The fact that they did not discuss some of the things we discuss does not mean that they cannot do so now, through us. By studying the history of philosophy in a scholarly way we put ourselves in a position to be able to evaluate whether our views can stand up to theirs. History of philosophy, then, is important not merely as the history of an ongoing discipline, but also as a means for doing philosophy now. If we do history of philosophy in the way Ryle does, we will do philosophy poorly because we will not assess the alternatives adequately.

I agree with Curley that doing history of philosophy is essential to doing good philosophy but I would like to go further concerning the historical nature of philosophy. As I understand him, Curley believes
that there is progress in the history of philosophy, as we replace old philosophies with better ones. However, he is also arguing that we should not reject old philosophers, since they still have something to say to us when we ask them questions. That is, the study of old philosophies enables us to understand the minds that created them and to see how those minds would have answered our new questions. Thus, careful work in the history of philosophy helps us to make progress by enabling us to see where philosophy has gone wrong and how it has improved, and in addition by providing us with intelligent critics to assess our work.

I think there is something wrong with that view of the history of philosophy. To see what this is, it may help to compare the history of science with the history of philosophy.

Science, like philosophy, has a history, but science "forgets" its history. Certain methods and solutions are carried along but those which are not need not be remembered. The history of science is important and interesting as history, but it is irrelevant to contemporary science, that is to the doing of science. A scientist does not have to know anything about what has been rejected to be a good scientist. To use Kuhn's language, a scientist is taught a paradigm and it is not important for him to learn about past paradigms to do science. (This, of course, is not the case for philosophers or historians of science who want to learn about the doing of science.) To say that there is progress in science is to say that what we have now is better than what we had before, but more than that, it is to say that we can forget what we had before.

How is philosophy different from this picture of science? Unlike science, philosophy is (or should be) essentially historical, that is, it should always be conscious of its history. Of course, that it is essentially historical is precisely what Michael Scriven denies. If Scriven's attitude becomes the predominant attitude, philosophy might indeed cease being essentially historical. So the question is not only "What is philosophy?" (or "What has philosophy been?") but is also "What ought philosophy to be?" To say that philosophy ought to be historical is to say that philosophy will lose something valuable if it ceases to be historical. If I am right about this then philosophy is different from science in this respect. Constant concern with the history of earlier theories would get in the way of the scientist. Why is this not true of philosophy? In what way does philosophy "remember" its past?