Fifty Years of History of Philosophy
50th Chapel Hill Colloquium

Don Garrett

When I was asked to speak briefly about the last fifty years of the history of philosophy, my first thought was: "Sure—just a short history of the history of philosophy." But then I started to wonder: "Would that really be a '*history* of the history of philosophy'?" "The last fifty years" includes things that happened just in the last decade, and the last year, and the last month. It includes Amie Thomasson's excellent talk at this very colloquium last evening. Were Ted Sider's excellent comments *about* that excellent talk thereby a contribution not only to metaphysics but also to "the history of philosophy?" For that matter, "the last fifty years" even includes the beginning of *this* short talk—and the beginning of this sentence. (And now the *end* of that sentence.) Surely *those* aren't subjects of *history* yet, are they? And that led me to ask myself: "How old does something have to *be* before it really becomes a proper subject of history?"

As I pondered that, I was reminded of a remark I once heard the poet Andrei Codrescu make. He said: "Americans hate history. That's why, when they don't *like* a person, they say, "You're history." So then I thought, maybe how quickly something passes into history depends on what *kind* of thing it *is*. Maybe someone you want to break up with can become history very quickly, whereas other things, like sea-battles or landmarks take much *longer* to become history. So I found myself narrowing the scope of my question down to this: "How long does it take before *work in philosophy* becomes (a subject of) history?" This seemed like a rather philosophical question about the history of philosophy, and so, I realized, I had just posed for myself a question in the <u>*philosophy*</u> *of the history of philosophy*. But then I thought: "Interesting as that question is, my charge for the Colloquium is not to discuss the last fifty years of philosophy generally, but just the last fifty years of the subfield *history of philosophy*." So I saw that the more *specific* question I needed to answer was really: "How long does it take for work specifically in the field of the *history of philosophy* to become *itself* a subject of history?" And *that*, of course, is a question in *the philosophy of the history of the* <u>*history*</u> *of philosophy*.

Unfortunately, having posed that question, I wasn't sure right off the bat how to begin addressing it. But I am a historically minded philosopher, and whenever I have a philosophical question that I don't know how to address, I soon find myself asking: "Well, have any philosophers of the *past* shed light on this question?" And so, in the case at hand, I started wondering: "Did any philosophers of the past think about *when* previous contributions to philosophy in general, or to the history of philosophy in particular, became subjects of history? For example, did Plato consider the pre-Socratics to be already part of the subject-matter of the *history* of philosophy—and why or why not? And did Aristotle at some point already consider what *Plato said about* the pre-Socratics to be part of the *history* of the history of philosophy—and why or why not?" The question about Plato, I recognized, was a question in *the* <u>*history*</u> *of the philosophy of the history of philosophy*, while the

question about Aristotle was a question in *the history of the philosophy of the history of the* history *of philosophy.* At that point, I felt a bit dizzy and had to lie down.

After a few minutes, I *raised* my head and *lowered* my *mind* back to the level of the philosophy of the history of philosophy. Once I got myself properly recalibrated, I remembered arguing in a recent department meeting that *course distribution requirements* should treat as part of the history of philosophy any work that is *fifty years old or older*. My reason was that that seemed to be the criterion employed by *journals* devoted to the history of philosophy, as shown by research into their past tables of contents. If that is the *right* criterion, then we are meeting at an auspicious moment indeed: the last year before the first Chapel Hill Colloquium, held forty-none years ago, itself passes into the history of philosophy. Of course, if that *is* the right criterion, it also means that those philosophers who live long enough to comment on work of their own published more than fifty years earlier can contribute to the history of philosophy as a field just by *discussing about their own earlier work.* That seems like a worthy goal to aim for, actually, and it is one I'm sure that some here today will achieve. Some may already have achieved it.

Having decided that the last fifty years of work in the history of philosophy is itself about to start passing into the subject-matter of the history of philosophy, let me begin an early installment on its future history by describing the first history of philosophy talk given at this Colloquium: O.K. Bouwsma's, "Samuel Johnson and the Stone," given in 1968 and later published as "Notes on Berkeley's Idealism." The title alludes, of course, to Johnson's famous attempt to refute Berkeley's idealism by emphatically kicking a stone and saying, "Thus I refute Berkeley." Bouwsma's inimitable abstract read: "This paper is an elaboration of Samuel Johnson's kicking the stone. The elaboration does not consist in my kicking more stones." Instead, the paper was an exercise in what could best be called *Wittgensteinian* history of philosophy, which sought to diagnose the linguistic confusions of philosophers of the past for present-day therapeutic purposes. Bouwsma's distinctive method for doing this featured close interrogations and sometimes parodies of small pieces of text. For example, one of his other well-known lectures of this kind discussed at length the logic of Descartes's introduction of his famous dreaming argument, which states, "On many occasions I have in sleep been deceived." Bouwsma compared this with the logic of the similar-sounding sentence, "On many occasion I have in Chicago been deceived," going on to discuss various possible pranks and scams that could befall a visitor to Chicago. (He read this paper at an APA meeting held in Chicago.)

Bouwsma's Colloquium paper did give considerable prominence to a properly historical claim—namely, that Johnson's stone-kicking refutation evidenced a misunderstanding of what Berkeley was trying to do. The argument for that claim appealed almost entirely to a single paragraph from Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge* plus James Boswell's brief description of Johnson's kick. Notably *absent* was any mention of any further historical facts about Berkeley, Johnson, their writings, their predecessors, or their times.

Wittgensteinian history of philosophy of that kind was provocative and no doubt seemed promising at the time, at least in Bouwsma's cunning hands, but it hasn't really panned out. Subsequent Colloquium papers in the history of philosophy—by

such luminaries as Gregory Vlastos, Gail Fine, Julia Annas, Martha Nussbaum, Margaret Wilson, Ed Curley, Robert Fogelin, and Stephen Darwall—have often drawn much more on the historical context of the authors under discussion. And this corresponds to one of the main developments in history of philosophy as a field over the last fifty years: a greater emphasis on understanding the *context* in which philosophical ideas are produced and the intellectual exchanges of which they are parts. This trend has become so prominent in the last twenty-five or thirty years that many historians of philosophy—though perhaps more early modernists than historians of other periods—have come to identify themselves as "contextualists."

Let me try to put this development in, um, context. I have claimed in the past—though not yet in the historical past!—that there are (at least) *four* things that one might try to do with past philosophical works. The first is *contextualization*: determining and explaining the philosophical, scientific, political, cultural, and religious situation in which the work arises, together with the aims and projects of the philosopher (or philosophers) who produced it. The second is *interpretation:* understanding and explaining the nature and meaning of the concepts, questions, doctrines, arguments, methodological approaches, and theoretical frameworks of the work. The third is *evaluation*: the assessment of these elements of the work for such properties as coherence, clarity, and importance; truth or probability of truth; soundness, validity, and strength; theoretical fruitfulness; and adaptability and completeness. The fourth is *appropriation*: the utilization of resources derived from the work in the attempt to determine and defend the true or best answers to live philosophical questions.

Each of these four endeavors is of independent intellectual interest—if anything is—and they stand in no conflict with one another except to the extent that they compete for scarce time, effort, or resources. That conflict can in some cases be substantial. But the most important relation among the four endeavors, I take it, is one of *dependence*: Success in any endeavor later on the list demands at least a certain degree of success in each of the prior endeavors on that list. The rise of contextualism in the last few decades is largely the result of the growing recognition that attempts at interpretation tend to be both erroneous and ultimately *less* interesting if they are not sufficiently informed by context of all kinds.

To be sure, interpretations uninformed by context can make evaluation and appropriation *seem* easier—but all too often, they do so by turning these endeavors into shooting fish in a barrel or anachronistically reading currently fashionable views into other eras, leaving real success elusive. Conversely, historically *informed* interpretations can *complicate* efforts at evaluation and appropriation—leaving some contextualists skeptical or even cynical about the value or even possibility of these two latter endeavors. Happily, recent trends are toward an appreciation of all four endeavors and of their crucial relations of dependence. Partly because they can be in competition for time, effort, and resources, however, and partly because each demands a different, though overlapping, set of skills, it is increasingly obvious that the history of philosophy must be a *Baconian* rather than a *Cartesian* field of knowledge—that is, one that is so vast and dependent on so many specialized skills

that it cannot all be encompassed in a single mind and so must instead be a socially organized structure of distributed knowledge and expertise.

One salutary result of the increasing investigation of context in the last twenty-five to thirty years has been an increasing amount of high-quality scholarship on what have sometimes been called "minor figures" in philosophy—in contrast with "major" or previously canonical figures. A beneficial further consequence has been enhanced appreciation of the contingency in many cases of the distinction *between* canonical and non-canonical figures, and the value for appropriation of many previously unknown or under-appreciated philosophers. And the *confluence* of *this* broad trend toward investigating new figures with the development of *philosophical feminism* has led, in turn, to perhaps the most important and exciting development in the history of philosophy in the last few decades: the rediscovery and increasing understanding of many women philosophers, especially of the early modern period. One recent landmark event in this development was an NEH-sponsored conference held up the road at Duke last spring, co-directed by Andrew Janiak and Marcy Lascano, and devoted specifically to Émilie du Châtelet, Anne Conway, and Margaret Cavendish.

Even as *this* work of rediscovery continues, we can already see that the next great development in the history of philosophy will be *cosmopolitanism*: the integration of all world philosophical traditions into the disciplinary structure of the history of philosophy, including full and regular evaluation and appropriation of works of the past. Philosophy's long-term future is surely as a single fully global discipline. *As* a global enterprise, however, it will draw inspiration and nourishment from the many different cultural traditions of philosophy's *past*—not only those of the ancient Mediterranean and modern Europe, but also from the powerful traditions of India, China, the Arab world, Africa, and other parts of the globe. This will make the history of philosophy a more Baconian enterprise than ever.

Perhaps historians of philosophy in the past have sometimes worried that they might eventually run out of work to do because all of the philosophers worth studying will finally be well understood. ("Haven't you people figured out what Spinoza was saying *yet*?" I have sometimes heard with exasperation. "Still working!" we reply.) It is perhaps partly for this rather *professional* reason that philosophers who seem both great and difficult to understand have been so especially valued in the field. But there is no need to worry, at least for the near term: the history of philosophy as a field has never had more on its plate.

I have not had time to trace the often surprising changes in our understandings of any particular philosophers over the last fifty years, so me close by paraphrasing from memory a very history of philosophy by Rod Long that circulated anonymously a few decades ago in the Chapel Hill Department of Philosophy. It focused on just three key figures in the history of philosophy: "Thales, who invented philosophy; Descartes, who perfected it; and Wittgenstein, who ended it":

> **Thales**: We now possess only fragments of his work, making interpretation satisfyingly difficult, but one of his major theses may be formalized thus: "For all x, x is water." The key to interpreting this puzzling thesis is to recognize

> that the Principle of Charity (so essential to the historian) requires us to treat the quantifier in "for all x, x is water," as ranging over a restricted domain of discourse, namely *water*. This makes the thesis come out not only plausible but actually true.

[I am reminded here of the classic qualifying examination question: "Thales thought that everything is water. Anaximenes thought that everything is air. What do *you* think everything is, and why?"]

> **Descartes**: One of Descartes's primary philosophical claims was that he himself existed. Subsequent historical research has established that Descartes did, in fact exist. This is an important instance in which a major philosophical thesis has actually been conclusively confirmed by empirical research.
>
> **Wittgenstein**: The later Wittgenstein chose not to enunciate any positive philosophical theses in his published works, but his true views were circulated among his students in fragments. It is rumored that one of his esoteric doctrines was: "For all x, x is water."

Of course, Wittgenstein did not *really* end philosophy—as we all must in time, he just passed into its history. And as long as philosophy itself continues, the *history* of philosophy will *never* run out of work to do. For one thing, each generation must apply its own new philosophical tools and find its own new ways to appropriate the history of philosophy to its own live philosophical issues. But for another, the history of philosophy is unique among philosophical fields in being *guaranteed* to have an *ever-increasing* subject matter—growing at the slow but dependable rate of one year per year, and soon to include the First Chapel Hill Colloquium.