

Expressing Historically Well-Informed Ideas for a Contemporary Audience: Is Historically Well-Informed Fictionalism a Viable Alternative?

It's not uncommon for scholars interested in early modern philosophy to find a connection to and engagement with contemporary issues. This happens both because contemporary influential figures often engage with early modern philosophers to critically address a philosophical problem (e.g., Fodor's LOT or Chomsky's universal grammar; Ryle (and many others) on Descartes), or because they see a neglected continuity between past and modern issues that they want to bring to light. Working at the intersection of the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy raises many methodological questions and poses various challenges both in the process of writing (from "having something to say" to actually "saying it"), and in the process of publishing the written piece.

The first and most prominent question, which often lurks in the background of the whole process of writing, is a "sense-question": why engaging, as an early modern historian of philosophy, with contemporary issues? The question often stands even after one has clarified the particular aim of the envisioned paper (to challenge a contemporary philosopher's view on an historical issue that becomes "standard"; to bring to light a neglected tradition that might be relevant to the contemporary issue at hand, etc...), because the answer depends on methodological questions raised by the aim of achieving both philosophers of the early modern period and contemporary philosophers. To this end, the most pressing challenge is to find the balance between historical accountability and systematic reconstruction. On this balance depends not only the success in reaching the envisioned readership, but, more importantly, the success in getting published in the first place. Submitting such a piece of scholarship to a standard peer-reviewed journal means that most potential reviewers are likely to be trained and qualified to prove either the historical side of the paper, or its systematic soundness, whereas standard peer-review requires reviewers to evaluate the paper in its integrity. The risk is to produce work that appears to a non-historically trained audience to engage in superfluous historical debate, or to a historically trained audience to engage too superfluously in historical debate. Addressing contemporary issues from a historical perspective can also be fraught with anachronism and the risk of projecting issues and ideas that are not present in the past, even though the historian may see them.

To meet these challenges, most historians of philosophy tend either to make a connection to the contemporary issue, while offering a "canonical" work in the history of philosophy, or to offer models drawn from accurate historical reconstructions. In this paper, I would like to discuss the methodology inspired by this latter strategy and label it as "historically well-informed fictionalism". I argue that historically well-informed fictionalism is a way of doing history of philosophy that consciously embraces all the errors listed by Skinner in his influential paper "*Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*" (1969), but at the same time avoids those errors because it deliberately produces a fictional philosophical entity (a philosopher, a theory, an argument) that acts as an interface between past and present philosophical issues. Methodologically, historically well-informed fictionalism remains faithful to historical work because the fictional philosophical entity is not invented, but grounded in historical reconstructions, historical debates on theories and arguments, and textual evidences. It understands the work in the history of philosophy as a division of labor: Historically well-informed fictionalism thrives from the work of those scholars that engage with historical issues more in depth. At the same time, it tries to overcome anachronism by offering a fictional entity that interfaces with the contemporary readership and is more accessible to a contemporary audience. It offers a peculiar perspective to contemporary issues by providing unseen angles of

observation inspired by past philosophers and theories. In clarifying how the proposed view meets the methodological challenges, the paper discusses pro and contra of this methodology: Pro: methodological pluralism in the history of philosophy and freedom of historical research: history is not limited by its “Wirkungsgeschichte” and there is no reason to privilege canonical vs. non-canonical figures, the opposite. Contra: Why history? Exercise of conceiving differently, out of the box, in (dis)continuity with the past.

Keywords: Fictionalism in writing history of philosophy; Early modern philosophy today; Skinner on methodology.