



The history of philosophy – an obituary?*

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review of

Anthony Kenny (2010) *A new history of Western philosophy*. Oxford University Press: Oxford. (HB, pp. 1058, £30.00, ISBN 9780199589883)

The great German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Hegel's prefatory note to his 1816 *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* inquisitively gestured towards the methodological and practical difficulties inherent to the task of historicizing philosophy:

How should we begin to treat a subject, the name of which is certainly mentioned often enough, but of whose nature we as yet know nothing? (Hegel, 1892a)

Hegel addresses this question not to his fellow professors but rather to his students, students who were surely already curious in this specific regard. How, Hegel asks his students to ask themselves, is anybody to talk meaningfully about the History of Philosophy when they don't yet know what Philosophy is? And how, moreover, can that which is supposed to speak in the name of timeless and eternal truths– Philosophy– logically lend itself towards historicity, in part, or at all? They are just the sorts of questions which get us thinking about the history of philosophy and so, they are just the sorts of questions that we should begin by asking in a review of a book like this.

* Thanks to Sam Mansell for suggesting to me that I should do a review of this book, to Nick Butler, for waiting so long for me to do it, and to Kate Kenny, for her editorial guidance

Such questions, and this is the main point that Hegel ascribed to them, required students to think about what the history of philosophy entails and, in so doing, to form an active relationship towards it. ‘The study of the history of Philosophy’, Hegel goes on to teach, ‘is an introduction to Philosophy itself’ (Hegel, 1892b). This is not to say that in familiarising ourselves with the history of philosophy we are doing philosophy, of course. It is rather to say that we cannot become philosophers without first of all bearing witness to the ongoing historical becoming of philosophy. We should study the history of philosophy, according to Hegel, not so that we can be historians but so that we might become philosophers:

This is the function of our own and of every age: to grasp the knowledge which is already existing, to make it our own, and in so doing to develop it still further and to raise it to a higher level. In thus appropriating it to ourselves we make it into something different from what it was before. On the presupposition of an already existing intellectual world which is transformed in our appropriation of it, depends the fact that Philosophy can only arise in connection with previous Philosophy, from which of necessity it has arisen. The course of history does not show us the Becoming of things foreign to us, but the Becoming of ourselves and of our own knowledge. (*ibid.*)

Hegel’s preliminary methodological remarks concerning the history of philosophy reverberate throughout Anthony Kenny’s recent contribution to the genre (2010: ix, 502). Just like Hegel’s, Kenny’s history of philosophy draws attention towards, and subsequently distinguishes between, its historical and its philosophical components. Having made this distinction Kenny, like Hegel, again collapses it since ‘any serious history of philosophy’, he argues, ‘must itself be an exercise in philosophy as well as in history’ (2010: xiv). Philosophy and history, in other words, are the two sides of the same coin.

Also like Hegel’s history, Kenny’s initially emphasizes the inherently pedagogical nature of the endeavour he and his audience are embarking upon– the study of the history of philosophy remains the fundamental task awaiting any would-be philosopher (2010: xvii). Both histories are forms of apprenticeship, therefore, the main difference between them in this regard is that for Hegel, those seeking mere erudition from the history of philosophy should find their dinner party anecdotes elsewhere (1892c). Kenny, on the other hand, sees no real objection to feeding those who want to satisfy their appetite for ‘information and entertainment’ (xvii) with the fruit of his life-long scholarly labour.

Beyond differing with Hegel on the questions of by whom and in what spirit philosophy should be studied by the living, however, Kenny’s history also differs from Hegel’s in at least three other important ways. Firstly, Kenny’s covers an entire epoch of philosophical labour which Hegel’s could not have foreseen and

certainly couldn't have engaged with– post–Hegelian philosophy – and for this reason Kenny's history is broken into four epochs, as opposed to the Hegelian three. Secondly, again since Hegel, philosophy, as with many other intellectual endeavours, has become an increasingly specialised affair, the consequence being that 'no one person can read more than a fraction of the vast secondary literature that has proliferated in recent years around every one of the thinkers discussed in this volume' (xvi). Hegel's history conceded no such qualifications, which probably says a lot more about the time Hegel was working in than it does about Hegel himself.

Finally, Kenny's history is distinguished, by him, from Hegel's *Lectures*, from the first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and by implication from the whole genre of philosophical writing which 'saw the teachings of the earlier philosophers they recorded as halting steps in the direction of a vision they were themselves to expound' (ix) in that it is a creature of modesty and exegesis rather than one of hubris and pronouncement:

because philosophy is all–embracing, so universal in its field, the organization of knowledge that it demands is something so difficult that only genius can do it. For those of us who are not geniuses, the only way in which we can hope to come to grips with philosophy is by reaching up to the mind of some great philosopher of the past. (x)

It is so that his readers can begin to come to terms with the great philosophers of the past that Kenny has produced his book. He has written it with a level of enthusiasm which is as instructive as it is infectious and, while the book is self–professedly aimed at non–specialists, I would defy anybody to read this book and not learn many things of genuine value from it, Anthony Kenny apart. In addition to offering a general account of the major contributions which have been made during the two and a half millennia of western philosophy, Kenny also specifies how the major strands of western philosophy (logic, epistemology, physics, metaphysics, mind, ethics, politics, theology, aesthetics and language) have each waxed and waned in the passing of time. The prose is didactic throughout, without ever feeling condescending, and the reader is always offered the primary and secondary, as well as the critical resources, which would allow them to pursue any topic of interest further. In what follows I offer what can only be a brief whiff of the very rich feast which Kenny has served up here, before concluding with some general remarks about books like his.

As already mentioned, the book is structured into four major historical epochs. The first of these begins with the pre–Socratic Thales of Miletus and stretches onwards as far as the neo–Platonic Plotinus and the Christian neo–Platonist Augustine. The story told in the first part of the book is very much one of gradual

philosophical refinement reaching its culmination in the philosophy of Aristotle. ‘The history of philosophy’, Kenny writes, ‘does not begin with Aristotle, but the historiography of philosophy does’ (8). It is Aristotle who points out the weaknesses of his teacher’s Plato’s philosophy, as well as those inherent to the scattered fragments and received wisdoms of the pre-Socratics, as a means of creating a system which would ultimately cast its shadow upon all subsequent philosophy. Augustine, for his part, has one foot in the Ancient period covered within the first part of the book, and the other in the Medieval period covered within the second part of the book, since his system includes elements of pagan *and* Christian philosophy. ‘Of all the philosophers in the ancient world’, Kenny asserts, ‘only Aristotle had a greater influence on human thought’ (94) than Augustine. The remaining three parts of the book offers testament to this claim.

The Middle Ages, Kenny shows in the second part of the book, is a period of philosophical productivity which owes just as much to the intellectuals of its time, many of whom had names beginning with the letter A (Augustine, Avicenna, Anselm, Abelard, Averroes, Aquinas), as it does to a variety of practical contingencies. Among these were the contingencies of the translation of Ancient Greek texts into Latin, Hebrew and Arabic, along with the associated work of commentary; the contingencies of intellectual professionalism and institutionalisation, and, above all; the contingencies of clerical authority. Of the four philosophical periods covered in Kenny’s history, this is the one which frequently gets passed over within many university courses on the history of philosophy. It is also a period through which Kenny’s personal interests in narrating the history of philosophy, pedagogical reasons apart, are brought into sharper relief. The reader will have already begun to suspect the presence of these extra-pedagogical concerns within the first part of the book when the narration of Plato and Aristotle is populated by the sort of notation familiar to all analytical philosophers and most mathematicians. By the time the book makes it to the Middle Ages, there can no longer be any doubt that there are biographical factors guiding Kenny’s quill:

My own training in philosophy began at the Gregorian University in Rome, which, in the 1950s, still aimed to teach philosophy *ad mentem Sancti Thomae* in accordance with the instructions of recent popes...After studying at the Gregorian, I did graduate work in philosophy at Oxford in the heyday of ordinary language philosophy...many of the problems exercising philosophers in the analytic tradition at that time were very similar to those studied, often with no less sophistication, by medieval philosophers and logicians (259).

There will be more said about the relevance of Kenny’s extra-pedagogical sympathies in a moment. For now, pedagogically, Kenny underlines how if the ancient period culminates in the veracity of the Aristotelian system, and if the

medieval period hosts debates concerning the value, or otherwise, in reconciling the Aristotelian system with religious doctrine, then the modern period cannot but strike us for its relative if not almost absolute absence of Aristotelianism. This is the period where Thomas Hobbes slandered the Schoolmen for their want of knowledge of reality, the period where physical and scientific empirical experimentalism comes to the fore, the period within which philosophy is mostly done outside of the university, and the period which culminates in Hegel's philosophical system. Above all it is Descartes who, in his attempt to find new and firm foundations for philosophical speculation and knowledge acquisition is, for Kenny, 'the standard bearer for the rebellion against Aristotle' (501) and by extension, the characteristic modern philosopher:

in the history of philosophy his position is like that of the waist of an hourglass. As the sand in the upper chamber of such a glass reaches its lower chamber only through the slender passage between the two, so too ideas that had their origin in the Middle Ages have reached the modern world through a narrow filter: the compressing genius of Descartes. (532)

Descartes is the pinch-point of Kenny's history – his work heralds in the third of the four crucial periods of philosophy – the modern period. Kenny's narration of the modern period treats a chapter on Logic and Language as temporarily superfluous (these concerns will reappear in his account of the final period), a chapter on Political Philosophy as demonstrably indispensable (for the first time), and a chapter on Physics as no longer abiding (it ceases to be the concern of the philosopher so as to become that of the scientist). Within the modern period, furthermore, the old gradually begins to give way to the new and the single, continuous tradition gradually becomes a series of diverse, parallel traditions. After the modern period, things only become ever more fragmented:

In the nineteenth century there was a constant interchange of philosophical ideas between the countries of continental Europe and the English-speaking world...By the middle of the twentieth century all this had changed. Continental and Anglophone philosophers went their separate ways, hardly speaking the same language as each other. In Britain and America the analytic tradition in philosophy, which Russell had helped to found, had come to be *dominant in academic circles*, and had almost driven out alternative styles of philosophizing. In continental Europe existentialism was *the fashionable school*, led in France by Jean-Paul Sartre and in Germany by Martin Heidegger. Well-meaning attempts to bring together proponents of the different styles of philosophizing met with only limited success in the second half of the century [Italics Added]. (810)

It doesn't take too much to determine which side of this divide Kenny's sympathies rest with, not least of all because we have already been given strong hints in this regard within his discussion of earlier philosophical periods. For those who only want an account of recent philosophical developments from the

book, the lesson is that analytical philosophy was a near dominant academic tradition which almost achieved intellectual hegemony, whereas ‘existentialism’ and everything that is said to follow from it was, and indeed remains, little other than a ‘fashionable school’. As an ordinary language philosopher, Kenny is more than aware of what he is doing when he opposes near dominance to mere fashion— he is teaching that recent philosophy is made up of the sensible and the silly, and that, as well—meaning as he undoubtedly is, there is only so much silliness he is willing to take. Kenny’s four page discussion of Jacques Derrida (824–828) is therefore either the polemical low point or high point of the book, depending on where your own philosophical sympathies lie. That this passage is supposed to be read as a pedagogically instructive discussion, rather than as a professionally and biographically motivated sentiment is, I think, a bit of a problem.

Nevertheless, I’m not so sure that Kenny, the Wittgenstein sympathiser, has actually let himself down in refusing to pass over that of which he cannot speak into silence. After all, he offers his history of philosophy to his readers with the explicit caveat that in many cases he will ‘write of necessity as an amateur rather than an expert’ (xvi). It will be a cold day in hell before Anthony Kenny claims to be a Derrida expert, of course, so perhaps the lack of respect with which he treats Derrida’s work, as well as his lack of *any* acknowledgment he pays to Adorno, Bergson, Foucault, Deleuze and Rorty, to mention only five of the more obvious omissions, can perhaps be excused as the inevitable shortcomings of a history of philosophy written in an age of intellectual fragmentation and specialisation— an age he has diagnosed. In as much as one reviewer might take issue with the way in which Kenny has engaged with Derrida, so too another reviewer might well challenge the account of Plantinga with which he closes. Perhaps, in the end, it is asking too much of any single person, however much they have read and however carefully, to give an authoritative account of the history of philosophy. What Randall Collins and W.K.C. Guthrie said of their histories of philosophy, Anthony Kenny has no doubt also thought of his own: ‘it seemed better to finish the work in my own lifetime’ (Collins, 1998: xix).

In an interview about the book, Kenny suggested that it is best understood as steering something of a middle course between the excessive jocularly of Russell’s *History*, on the one hand, and the excessive seriousness of Coplestone’s *History*, on the other (Philosophy Bites, 2007). In this regard, as well as in many others, the book is clearly a triumph. What it is not, however, is an uncontroversial history of philosophy. If such a book can no longer be written by any one person, if indeed it ever could have been, perhaps what is required is not so much the dis-continuation of the form as its re-continuation by other means. In addition to its being the period where the analytical and the

continental philosophical traditions parted ways, post–Hegelian philosophy is also the period within which the concern with the relationship between philosophy and history became ever more central. If there is a single question which unites the ‘fashionable school’ of ‘existentialism’ it is this.

Perhaps a pronounced hermeneutical discussion along these lines has little place in a work like Kenny’s, however, since it moves us away from the primacy of pedagogy. In which case the history of philosophy can also be explored by students through alternative formats to the 1,000 page tome such as, for example, cartographical diagrams (Drunks&Lampposts, 2012), podcasts (e.g. <http://www.historyofphilosophy.net/home>) and online lecture courses (e.g. http://www.openculture.com/philosophy_free_courses). Kenny’s book is by no means the last history of western philosophy which will be composed. It is, however, perhaps the last one which will be single–authored and book bound.

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