The History of Early-Modern Philosophy: The Construction of a Useful Past

Knud Haakonssen

1. Introduction

The history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy is a subject with its own history. However, the idea of what constitutes early-modern philosophy has been remarkably stable for the two centuries that have elapsed since the period in question and this stability has obscured the simple fact of its historicity and made it peculiarly difficult to question the historical adequacy of that idea. What is more, even now when detailed scholarship has undertaken such questioning in earnest, tradition is so strong that works of synthesis and overview – not to speak of teaching – have to pay it considerable respect in order to find an identifiable audience.

The idea that there was a distinctively early-modern philosophy from Bacon and Descartes to Reid and Kant has been the backbone of most general histories of philosophy in the post-Renaissance and post-Reformation period. It is influence is pervasive. It is the paradigm within which we work, or, at least, from which we set out, even when we want to be critical of it. As so often with general paradigms of old vintage, this one is vague and endlessly flexible, and any brief delineation of it is correspondingly difficult, not to say hazardous. However, it is possible to indicate the historicity of this paradigm and thus to open up for discussion of its hallowed status.

2. The Concept of Early-Modern Philosophy

The most basic of the ideas which have dominated the writing of the history of
philosophy during the last two centuries is that the theory of knowledge is at the core of all sound philosophy, the true *prima philosophia*. Furthermore, the significance of early-modern philosophy is commonly considered in this historiography to be that the roughly three centuries from the late Renaissance to 1800 were the period when philosophers increasingly came to understand this true nature of philosophy. The problem of knowledge which philosophy was supposed to deal with was that posed by scepticism conceived as a denial of the possibility of justified beliefs or scientific explanations. The philosophical history of the period has therefore commonly been told as the story of an ever deepening struggle with scepticism which culminated in a total rejection of the premises upon which the contest had taken place, or, rather, in two such rejections, that by Immanuel Kant and that by Thomas Reid.

For these two thinkers the central question of philosophy was not, how can we acquire true knowledge? Rather, given that we do have knowledge (especially, science), how is this possible, or, what are its presuppositions? This standpoint inspired subsequent generations to a view of the trajectory of early modern philosophy according to which traditional ontology was largely an encumbrance on epistemology and the development from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century consisted in shedding this burden. It was the Hegelian transition from substance to subject, from the so-called ‘great systems’ within which Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz had fought scepticism, to the theories of perception, ideas and judgement with which Locke, Leibniz (again), Wolff, Berkeley, Condillac, Hume and many others tried to found the new sciences. It was a development, in other words, which confirmed and underlined one of the most elementary assumptions of the historians who traced it, namely that knowledge is to be
understood in terms of the individual person’s mind, an assumption which remained remarkably unshaken despite Hegel.

Integral to the view indicated here is that the epistemological approach divided post-Renaissance philosophy into two major schools or directions, namely rationalism and empiricism. The former has commonly been seen as characteristic of the European continent, though one of the defining features of eighteenth-century philosophy, on this view, was that France gradually switched from Cartesian rationalism to Lockean empiricism, embodied in Condillac. Germany, however, was supposed to maintain a continuous development of rational system-building through Leibniz, Wolff and their followers and opponents. In contrast, the English-speaking world was seen to pursue the empiricist view in ever finer detail from Bacon and Hobbes, through Locke, Berkeley and Hume.

This way of understanding the core of early-modern philosophy, I call the epistemological paradigm. It sees philosophy as essentially concerned with the justification of beliefs and judgements; it understands such justification in terms of events, whether perceptive or inferential, in the mind – or, as if in the mind – of the individual person; and it tends to apply this idea of epistemological justification as the criterion for what is properly included in the discipline of philosophy.

This basic model is familiar to everyone who has looked into the general histories of early-modern philosophy, both current and past, and to any teacher of the subject. Needless to say, there are a great many variations on this interpretative theme, often with
acknowledgement of important exceptions and additions, such as the presence of an empiricist strain in German Enlightenment thought; but the general features have been remarkably pervasive. Furthermore, the paradigm has reigned for a long time. The emphasis on the struggle against scepticism was already a prominent feature of the philosophical historiography of the Kantians at the close of the eighteenth century, and it has inspired some of the most appreciated contemporary scholarship in the form given to the thesis by Richard Popkin. Similarly, the pre-eminence given to epistemology is comparable in the Kantian Wilhelm Gottfried Tennemann’s 12-volume *Geschichte der Philosophie* (1798-1819) and Father Frederick Copleston’s 9-volume *A History of Philosophy* (1946-74). It is also noticeable that while morals, politics, law and art have gained status as objects of past philosophical inquiry in some recent general histories of philosophy, they are more often treated in the same stepmotherly manner as they were in the great 19th-century works, such as those by Friedrich Ueberweg and Kuno Fisher. Often they have been dealt with as separate disciplines with their own histories, obviously so in the case of the many histories of political thought, but also in major histories of ethics from, for instance, Christian Garve’s *Uebersicht der vornehmsten Principien der Sittenlehre, von dem Zeitalter des Aristoteles an bis auf die unsre Zeiten* (1798), through Sir James Mackintosh’s *Dissertation on the Progress of Ethical Philosophy* (1830), and Friedrich Jodl’s *Geschichte der Ethik in der neueren Philosophie* (1882-89), to J.B. Schneewind’s *The Invention of Autonomy. A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (1998).
3. The History of the Epistemological Paradigm

The epistemological paradigm for the history of early-modern philosophy has held sway so universally, at least until recently, that it may be surprising to suggest that it itself has a history, in fact, that it can be traced back to a particular episode or couple of episodes at the close of the eighteenth century. The paradigm became so widely accepted because it was propagated by two remarkably successful philosophical movements in which a useful past was an integral part, namely, as mentioned, the Scottish Common Sense philosophy formulated by Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart and the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. As far as the latter is concerned, the way had been cleared in one fundamental respect by Jacob Brucker’s and the Wolffians’ down-grading of practical philosophy relative to theoretical philosophy, as Tim Hochstrasser has shown. However, it was the Kantians who had the decisive influence on the writing of the histories.

The pattern of philosophical history laid down by Reid, Kant, and their followers became prescriptive far beyond their own heyday. One reason for this continuing impact seems to have been that the history of philosophy became the subject of more or less basic university courses on the European continent during the early and middle parts of the nineteenth century. It was during this period that it became widely accepted that the best introduction to the discipline of philosophy was through its history; and the textbooks for these courses were written under influence of the views indicated here. Thus was created a teaching- and text-book tradition which, as Ulrich Johannes Schneider has shown in great detail, swept through German- and French-dominated Europe. It also
crossed the Channel, for although the English and Scottish universities were much slower to adopt systematic tuition in the history of philosophy, there was clearly an interest in the subject sufficient to sustain public lecture series, such as the early ones by Coleridge and Hazlitt, as well as general texts, both domestic products such as Dugald Stewart’s *Dissertation Exhibiting the Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical and Political Philosophy since the Revival of Letters in Europe* (1815-21), George Henry Lewes’s *A Biographical History of Philosophy* (1845), Frederick Denison Maurice’s several histories, and a large number of more specialised or limited histories; and imported works in the form of translations, such as William Enfield’s version of Brucker, Tennemann, Hegel, Erdmann, Ueberweg, Windelband, Lefèvre, Alfred Weber, Cousin, Höfßing, and many more.

However, it is clear that the acceptance of the subject was much slower in England than on the Continent. The English long considered the history of philosophy a recent German invention, in a sense quite rightly. It may be a sign of the time it took for the epistemological paradigm to conquer Britain that Enfield’s (that is, Brucker’s) distinctly pre-Kantian history – Brucker first published in 1742-44 – remained acceptable so late in Britain: the fifth and last edition appeared in 1839.  

The epistemological paradigm has had a remarkable ability to transcend most major shifts in philosophy for nearly a couple of centuries. To take just one obvious example, often there was virtually no difference of view between the neo-Kantians and the logical positivists when it came to the general shape of the history of early modern philosophy. Indeed, when a philosopher switched from the Kantian to the positivist camp, his idea of historical development might well remain unchanged (even though his appraisals changed). Similarly, the paradigm has been able to straddle the major
confessional divides. There is not a whole lot of difference between, say, Karl Vorländer, Father Copleston, Bertrand Russell, and Anders Wedberg when it comes to deciding what is the main-stream of philosophy from Descartes to Kant.  

The philosophical differences between the two founders of the modern concept of the history of philosophy, Reid and Kant, were, of course, profound but there was a striking similarity in their reactions to the immediate philosophical past. They both considered that David Hume had brought the modern philosophical tradition to a sceptical crisis because he reduced knowledge to perceptually derived ideas whose representational warrant was impossible to establish. And they both rejected this notion of knowledge as ideas in favour of a concept of knowledge as judgements that are warranted by features of undeniability on the part of any individual who wants to claim any beliefs at all. At the same time, while there is a gulf between Reid’s establishment of the first principles of common sense and Kant’s transcendental deduction of the pure forms of sensible intuition and of the categories, they both retained a fundamental feature of what they took to be Hume’s approach, namely that knowledge is a matter of the activity of the individual mind. Both sides of this, the individualism and the mentalism, were to remain dominant assumptions in subsequent philosophy and, not least, in interpretations of the history of early modern philosophy.

Kant’s and Reid’s views of how modern philosophy had reached what they considered the impasse of Hume’s scepticism were not the same but they were compatible. Neither thinker wrote a history of philosophy, yet both developed their views in often intense dialogue with their predecessors. However, their discussions were
generally conducted as if with contemporaries. Both of them were distinct ‘presentists’ for whom the philosophy of the past had to be overcome by making it a moment in their own thought. In Kant’s case, this meant that we should deal with the history of philosophy, not as ‘historical and empirical’, but as ‘rational, i.e., possible a priori’ – a ‘philosophical archaeology’ of ‘the nature of human reason.’ (Loses Blatt F 3, in Ak 20: 341). When Kant does approach the history of philosophy as ‘historical and empirical’ in his Lectures on Logic, his surveys are not dramatically different from those of his contemporaries and his own promise of progress, namely the critical establishment of metaphysics as ‘the real, true philosophy’, itself seems to be within empirical history. However, when we turn to the treatment of the same history in the Kritik der reinen Vernunft, we find the critical overcoming of dogmatism and scepticism and the stalemate, ‘indifferentism’, to which they have fought each other to be inherent in reason itself. ‘The critical path alone is still open.’ Of course, it was this well-known idea of an unavoidable dialectical opposition between, on one hand, Leibniz’s and Wolff’s rationalism and dogmatism and, on the other, Locke’s empiricism tending to Hume’s scepticism that became the prototype of the canonical philosophical histories mentioned above.

The foundational history in this vein was the already mentioned twelve-volume work by Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann. Springing from Tennemann’s own lectures in Marburg, the work was of central importance to the three significant lecture series on the history of philosophy – mentioned above - which signalled the changing status of the subject at the opening of the nineteenth century, namely, Hegel’s in Berlin in the 1820s (and perhaps already in Jena in 1805), Cousin’s in Paris in 1815, and Coleridge’s in
London in 1818. Of these, Hegel’s were undoubtedly the most significant; they were an important step in Hegel’s philosophical development and they helped establish the central role of the history of philosophy in the philosophical curriculum. However, while they were certainly more catholic in their conception of philosophy than many of the Kantian histories, one cannot say that Hegel substantially changed the contours of early modern philosophy and its priorities that had been laid down by the Kantian revolution.

Something similar may be said about Schelling’s lectures ‘On the History of Modern Philosophy’, probably from 1833-4 (but with much earlier predecessors, now lost). Despite their title, the lectures are devoted to the development of German idealism and its ancestry in Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Wolff, but they do devote a couple of pages to Bacon and Hume, mainly so as to invoke the formula that, ‘From the beginning of modern philosophy …, rationalism and empiricism move parallel to each other, and they have remained parallel until now.’

True to his ardent empiricism, Reid made the history of philosophy a moment in his own philosophy by thinking of it as, in Kant’s words, ‘historical and empirical’ and, more particularly, as something which could be discarded in the discussion of mental philosophy once this had rid itself of silly metaphysical squabbles as natural philosophy had done. But until that day, Reid was sure that he had to ‘build with one hand, and hold a weapon with the other.’ Reid’s warfare was predominantly against the emergence of scepticism in modern thought. From René Descartes via Nicholas Malebranche, John Locke and George Berkeley to Reid’s own time, philosophical views of how the human mind acquires knowledge of the world that enables people to conduct the business of life
had become, as Reid saw it, more and more at variance with common understanding.

Reid thought that philosophers had been misled by the triumph of natural sciences into drawing an analogy between matter and mind and thus to using the methods of these sciences to explain both the cognitive and the active faculties of the mind. The very language that was being used in talking of mental phenomena was ‘physicalistic’, as we might say. The mental world was thus said to be composed of elements, ideas, and the composition was explained in spatial and mechanistic terms. Although few philosophers were materialists in the strict sense, most tended to understand the connection between ideas, passions, the will and behaviour in causal or quasi-causal terms. When driven to its final, absurd conclusions, which Reid found in the work of David Hume, modern philosophy had created a phantom-world of so-called ‘ideas’ that sprang from objects of observation; the self was a conglomeration of perceived ideas; and the will as the source of action was nothing but the balance of passionate impulses at any given moment.

This was Reid’s understanding of modern philosophy, which he considered not only false but dangerous. It is well known that Dugald Stewart elaborated considerably on this scheme in his influential Introduction to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the above mentioned Dissertation which Victor Cousin was instrumental in having published in French. It is less well known that a Reidian view of the history of philosophy was being propagated to the French-reading public already in the 1790s by the professor of philosophy at the Academy of Geneva, Pierre Prevost.

The impact of Common Sense philosophy in France became significant, however,
mainly through the efforts of Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard and, as far as the writing of the history of philosophy is concerned, through his pupil Victor Cousin. Royer-Collard had used the idea of common sense as a means of going beyond any of the established schools of philosophy to an underlying general rationality, and Cousin in effect developed this idea into a philosophical eclecticism with explicit reference to the long German tradition of eclecticism (especially in Brucker). In such a scheme, all philosophizing was directly dependent upon the history of the various philosophical standpoints, and Cousin’s preaching of the eclectic gospel gave a tremendous boost to the history of philosophy as a subject of teaching and scholarship in France. Soon he came under the influence of German idealism, especially Hegel and Schelling, and created his own less than perspicuous ego-philosophy as an amalgam of the Germans, the Scots and, first and last, Descartes. His idea of the shape of the philosophical past remained more or less stable, namely that there were four fundamental forms of philosophy, ‘sensualism’ (i.e., what was commonly taken to be Condillac’s sensationalism), ‘idealism’, common-sense, and mysticism. From these the eclectic philosopher could distil the appropriately knowing subject.

Although widely different, Kant’s critical philosophy, Reid’s Common Sense, and Cousin’s eclecticism had similar views of the role which the history of philosophy should play. All three saw it as their mission to overcome and go beyond the problems that had made up the history of philosophy. But while the past was history, it served well to make their own philosophies intelligible, to show the point in their argument. Consequently there was a philosophical justification, indeed, a philosophical need, for the ‘pedagogical’ use of the history of philosophy. In shaping this history, the philosophical priorities of
Kant and Reid were the fundamental factor. In each their way, they created the epistemological paradigm for the history of early-modern philosophy which has dominated the subject ever since they wrote. Our notion of the history of post-Renaissance philosophy is, in other words, itself the outcome of a particular episode in that history.

4. Limits of the Epistemological Paradigm

The epistemological paradigm for early-modern philosophy has been an immensely powerful vehicle for scholarship and for the self-understanding of the discipline of philosophy. Nevertheless, the paradigm is arguably at considerable variance with the philosophical self-understanding common in that period and this combined with the fact that the paradigm, as indicated above, is an historical accident suggest that it is part of the philosophical historian’s task to question it. Without pretending to any magic formula for finding out wie es eigentlich gewesen, one is led by a great deal of modern scholarship to query not only the detail, but the general lines of the paradigmatic view of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy.

We may begin with a simple observation about the geographic comprehensiveness of modern (nineteenth- and twentieth-century) versus early-modern history of philosophy, namely that the former is overwhelmingly Eurocentric. It may not be surprising that the philosophy of the North American colonies and the early American Republic generally has been treated as an extension of British thought, when noticed at all in general histories and university courses. But it is remarkable how suddenly all
interest in non-European thought dropped out of the general histories of philosophy. Commonly the pre-Enlightenment histories as well as the major eighteenth-century works, such as Brucker’s *Historia critica philosophiae* (1742-4), as a matter of course were ‘universal’ in their ambitions and included chapters not only on ancient ‘barbarian’ thought but also on Near and Far Eastern thought of the Christian era. However, once the idea of the distinctiveness of ‘modern’ philosophy took over, the non-European world disappeared from sight. The epistemological paradigm may here have had support from retrograde steps in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language in both the idealist and the emerging positivist world. It is thus remarkable that, for example, both Kant and James Mill were of the opinion that ‘barbarians’ could not have a philosophy because they thought concretely in images, not abstractly in concepts, a feat reserved for the Greeks and their European heirs. Closely associated with such views was the linguistic racism that gained strength in the nineteenth century.

A more complicated issue is the effect of gender bias on the writing of the history of philosophy during the last two centuries. Here feminist scholarship has gone to the roots of the epistemological paradigm. Through scrutiny of the standard idea of body-mind dualism and the associated masculinity of mind and reason, feminist scholars have questioned the tradition’s emphasis on the solitary rational mind as the focus of knowledge. This has happened especially through attention to early-modern theories of the passions. Such work has connected easily with the increasing attention to philosophical anthropology which will be noted below. However, feminist scholarship has largely shadowed the canon by adding figures to be analysed and in so far as it has
questioned the over-all shape of early modern philosophy, this has not yet had a major impact on general histories and courses.\textsuperscript{24}

Another general limitation in the common histories of philosophy is, as mentioned above, the treatment which ethics, politics and aesthetics have been subject to, at least until quite recently. When discussed at all, ethics and aesthetics have mostly been dealt with to the extent that they could be seen to raise modern meta-ethical issues of relevance to the general theory of knowledge. This is clearly the consequence of the combined Kantian and Reidian legacy. Both thinkers in effect subsumed ethics and aesthetics under epistemology by making the former two disciplines centrally concerned with the justification of moral, respective aesthetic judgements (which is not to deny that such justification and philosophy as a whole ultimately had a moral purpose). However, as we will see below, it is a considerable simplification of early modern ethical and aesthetic concerns to reduce them to questions of justification. What is more, it has until recently been forgotten that moral philosophy very often had a pedagogic priority as a ‘foundation course’ in university studies. Partly because of this status, it had its own historiography which shows a completely different idea of the shape of philosophy than the one assumed by later historians of ethics.\textsuperscript{25} This finding is amply confirmed by Christian Garve’s above-mentioned general history of ethics from the close of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{26}

Political theory, in contrast, has either been treated as a subject separate from the main line of philosophical argument, or it has been simply excluded from general histories of philosophy, a tendency reinforced by the development of political science as an independent discipline with a need for its own canon and a useful past. The idea that a
concern with the possibility of social living and its political implications could be the fundamental problem in philosophy, and that metaphysics and epistemology were to be seen as esoteric learning without claim to primacy and universality has therefore been more or less incomprehensible. Those thinkers who pursued such a line of argument, notably Samuel Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius, have not only not been taken seriously as philosophers, they have commonly been written out of the history of philosophy altogether, a process that began already with the Wolffian take-over of the German universities and has continued ever since. In the 1760s, Formey’s brief history of philosophy could still spare Grotius and Pufendorf, though not Thomasius, a couple of pages, but only as reformers of natural law. A century later, Friedrich Ueberweg made do with less than a page each for Pufendorf and Thomasius – and identified them under the characteristic section heading, ‘Zeitgenossen von Leibniz’ (contemporaries of Leibniz). In our own time, the following declaration is probably representative of common opinion: ‘Had Kant not lived, German philosophy between the death of Leibniz in 1716 and the end of the eighteenth century would have little interest for us, and would remain largely unknown.’ Only in recent years has this extraordinary distortion of the whole shape of German philosophical development in the eighteenth century begun to be rectified.

The narrowing effect of many histories of philosophy may be indicated by contrasting some structural features of early modern philosophy with those imposed on it subsequently. Of the four traditional disciplines into which philosophy continued to be divided, namely, logic, metaphysics, natural and moral philosophy, none was a natural place for the epistemological endeavours which subsequently came to be seen as the
hallmark of the period’s thought. Right through the eighteenth century, many epistemological questions turn up in the context of metaphysics while the rest are to be found in logic. However, this was a logic that had largely become a mental classification scheme. Of the two other disciplines, natural philosophy was wholly classificatory and explanatory and moral philosophy was much more so than its modern heirs. The issues that are considered ‘philosophical’ in our histories of philosophy, such as the epistemic adequacy of ideas or the normative warrant of obligation, have been picked out of these contexts. It is not at all clear in what sense we can be said to understand such pickings divorced from their explanatory framework; but it is clear that we have excluded a major part of what our forebears thought of as philosophy. It is equally clear that they did not have room for sub-disciplines of either epistemology or meta-ethics. Indeed, ‘epistemology’ as the label for the theory of knowledge was not invented until 1854 by James Frederick Ferrier. Sadly, his idea of agnoiology, or the theory of ignorance, has never caught on.30

Natural philosophy has its own historiography in the form of what is now called the history of science. However, it is still rare to see general histories of philosophy making more than highly selective use of this discipline. The historical gains have made the subject awkward for the epistemological high-road from Descartes to Kant. An equivalent history of moral philosophy, understood as the ‘science of morals’, has been much slower to develop but the intense study of Enlightenment anthropology in recent times has provided means to remedy the situation. It will be very difficult, however, to integrate much of this material into the standard history of ethics, for eighteenth-century moral science in general had a much wider scope than the issues which are the core of
contemporary ethics, especially the ground of normativity and obligation. Much of moral philosophy was as descriptive, classificatory, and explanatory in intent as natural philosophy and the basic justificatory mode of argument was often the same in both branches, namely teleological and, generally, providential. The major novelty of eighteenth-century moral thought prior to Kant’s critical turn, namely the idea that a law-governed ethics could be rejected by showing that morals were a matter of sentiment, was in itself an important element in the re-invigoration of the teleology of natural religion. When Hume pointed out to Hutcheson the fragility of this foundation, he was making it clear that such moral justification could not be part of the science of morals and that this science had to be part of a ‘true’ scepticism. Much of early-modern ethics was simply not concerned with the justification of moral beliefs and judgements in the way that Kant, Reid, and subsequent philosophers were. And in so far as the earlier thinkers were dealing with the moral faculties of the human mind, they were doing so as part of a wider science of morals, indeed, a general anthropology. The Copernican revolution which Hume saw as necessary in the moral sciences was fundamentally different from the more famous one proclaimed by Kant. Hume wanted the mind explained by means of general principles similar to those applied elsewhere in nature. Kant wanted an epistemic certification that objects conform to knowledge.  

All this is not to say that early-modern philosophers were not concerned with questions of how to lead the good life but these questions have tended to lie outside the interests of contemporary histories of ethics, at least until very recently. We may approach the question of how early-modern thinkers pursued normative concerns, as we would call it, by means other than the justification of belief through a consideration of
early-modern ideas of the practice of being a philosopher. The ancient idea that the value of a philosophy had to show itself in the life of its proponent retained great significance. While there is an established literature that approaches ancient philosophy in this light, it is only recently that something similar has been attempted with some aspects of early-modern thought. It has been argued, for instance, that even the more recondite parts of Descartes’ philosophy, such as his geometry, are properly to be understood as a spiritual exercise in the service of self-cultivation.\(^3^2\) At the other end of our period, the three sections of Kant’s *Groundwork*, it has been suggested, are to be seen as ‘stages in the spiritual grooming of a particular intellectual deportment – one that will regard true morality in terms of the commands of a pure rational being acceded to through the purifying discipline of metaphysics.’\(^3^3\) More broadly, the continued function of metaphysics as a spiritual exercise that has both personal and social aims has been analysed in detail.\(^3^4\)

Closely associated with such ideas was the notion that the philosopher’s proper role was to undergo such exercises so as to live an exemplary life. The depth of this understanding of the nature of philosophy can be illustrated in many ways. It is clearly shown through the reaction which Pierre Bayle was able to provoke with his presentation of Spinoza’s life as exemplary, a feat studiously repeated by Adam Smith nearly a century later in his ‘obituary’ for David Hume who himself was deeply concerned with properly presenting the sort of life his philosophy entailed.\(^3^5\) Shaftesbury was ever in pursuit of the appropriately stoic stance, as he saw it, and Berkeley obviously considered it a particularly sore point to assail that stance as a sham.\(^3^6\) It is telling also to notice the
parallel between the philosopher’s and the preacher’s concern with the importance of conspicuously filling their roles. Francis Hutcheson was never unmindful of the dignity of his office and the biography of him by his clerical colleague, William Leechman, reinforced the point. The significance of the phenomenon is further underlined by the universal success of Fontenelle’s invention of the éloge. Considered in a wider perspective, the proper conduct of the philosophical life was just a special – and especially important – case of the general method of approaching normative, practical, ‘applied’ ethics by delineating the ideal fulfilment of the offices of life.

These ideas of the intimate connection between life and philosophy and the associated conception of the historical passage of philosophy clearly lie outside the purview of the epistemological paradigm for early-modern philosophy. In the common perspective, the exemplary philosophical life and its historiographical significance is, at best, a quaint detail. Similarly, the practical ethics formulated through the notion of fulfilling one’s offices is not going to be a concern for those who are in pursuit of early forms of deontology and consequentialism.

In view of this role of the life of the philosopher, three other structural features of early-modern philosophy fall into place. First, the pervasive use of the ad hominem argument is significant. Wave after wave of undesirables – epicureans, deists, sceptics – was supposedly stemmed by the argument that they could not ‘live’ their philosophy. Secondly, if philosophy is viewed as inherently connected with the conduct of life, it is not so strange that the ancient arrangement of the history of philosophy into ‘sects’, or schools, should have remained influential through the seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries. The pivot of a sect was the founding figure whose example in self-cultivation was what made the school cohere. Not only was this approach maintained in the writing of the history of ancient philosophy, but it was a persistent concern in the period under consideration to see early-modern philosophy in light of the traditional sect system. This is conspicuously the case in the histories of philosophy, such as Brucker’s. It was clear to these historians, as to most people, that it was difficult to extend the ancient system unaltered to modern times, yet it remained the obvious classificatory system. This dilemma led them to a new development and this is the third point I want to mention in this connection. I am thinking of the role of eclecticism.

While this was a complex phenomenon, it is probably safe to say that the eclecticism which came to the fore in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, especially in Germany but with interesting features in common with English deism, was basically concerned with the possibility that a modern philosophy could be above the sects without itself being a sect if it could define the philosophical life as a non-dogmatic (non-sectarian) utilisation of all the sects. This has significance for two changes in the perception of the overall structure of philosophy. First, the eclectic ideal of going beyond sectarianism in philosophy lent the history of philosophy temporal direction; instead of the traditional largely a-temporal comparison of schools, the promise of progress and the threat of decline became prominent features of debate and quickly merged with more general ideas of humanity’s progressivism. This was, however, a highly ambivalent attitude for the eclectic idea of learning through methodical comparison soon led to a renewed form of the a-temporal ideal, namely that of not only learning systematically, in the sense of methodically, from the sects but of overcoming them by the creation of a
systematic philosophy, a philosophy that need not pay attention to the argumentative situation in which it finds itself among the various schools of thought.

The most obvious place to observe this paradoxical development is in Brucker who contrived to see Leibniz and Wolff as eclectics, mainly because he saw the whole of post-Renaissance philosophy as attempts at eclecticism and then celebrated the two great neo-scholastics as the apogee of that development. In other words, while he saw modern philosophy as liberation from an authoritarian sectarianism, he also saw it as undergoing doctrinal progress in a straight line from Descartes through Leibniz to Wolff, a line relative to which other forms of philosophy were incidental. As has been pointed out, Brucker, despite his eclectic starting point, thus paved the way for Kant’s simplification of the history of modern philosophy to an epistemological clash between rationalism and empiricism by serving up a ready-made model of the former. We may add that Formey’s above-mentioned brief history of philosophy, which drove Brucker’s argument to an extreme, seems to have been Kant’s most direct source.

Achieved by inversion of eclecticism, this idea of systematic philosophy was unusually potent, both immediately but especially in the longer term. Philosophy proper was philosophy that had overcome sectarianism and come of age by being the systematic, time-less, context-free search for truth. Thinking that did not fulfill these requirements simply was not philosophy, real philosophy. This more than anything else bolstered epistemology’s status as the core of genuine philosophy and the systematic drive became particularly strong in the German tradition with its metaphysical underpinning of epistemological endeavour.
Once this was entrenched in the historiographical canon from the nineteenth century onwards, non-systematic forms of philosophizing become marginalized or excluded. The Renaissance is at best covered as a somewhat chaotic period of transition; seventeenth- and eighteenth-century eclecticism itself disappears completely from historical view; the messy French philosophes are taken less than seriously; the ‘civic philosophers’ in the Pufendorfian tradition are, as mentioned, dismissed; and so forth. In fact, from this point of view most of moral and political thought was un-philosophical because unsystematic. Not only that. The passion for systematicity that grew out of the eighteenth century itself and conquered most historical scholarship for the subsequent couple of centuries meant that the Cartesian-Newtonian ideal of natural philosophy until recently completely overshadowed the other form of theorizing about the natural world which in fact was so important in the eighteenth century and whose greatest representative was Linnaeus, as Phillip Sloan explains:

The importance of Linnaean science as an alternative eighteenth-century scientific programme to Cartesian-Newtonian natural philosophy has rarely been appreciated. In terms of the familiar categories of eighteenth-century natural philosophy — experimental method, quantitative idealization, belief in an underlying mathematical structure of reality, primary-secondary qualities distinction, mechanistic and reductive explanations — Linnaean science presented almost a point by point contrast. Pervaded by a direct epistemological realism, in which the object of true science was ‘to know things in themselves’, Linnaean science was
qualitative, non-experimental and descriptive. It denied a radical subject-object dichotomy; it admitted no ‘problem of knowledge’ that troubled over epistemological scepticism and problems of sensation. It was theocentric, teleological, and more in touch with classical sources (Roman Stoicism, Scholastic logic) and Renaissance nature-philosophy than with the science of Descartes or Newton. The natural world, as it was experienced by the interested layman in all its colours, shapes, even in its anthropomorphic analogies, took precedence over material and mathematical analysis.  

Philosophical thought that was intertwined with human, civil history has had an equally hard time keeping a presence in the histories of philosophy and for no less interesting philosophical reasons. Here we touch upon what is perhaps the most deep-rooted element in the epistemological paradigm which I referred to above as its individualism and mentalism, the assumption that knowledge has to be accounted for in terms of the activity (or passivity) of the individual person’s mind. This assumption has made it difficult to give satisfactory accounts of some debates that were absolutely central in early-modern philosophy. First, there was the never-ending concern with history, sacred and profane, which demanded a theory of testimony, or of knowledge as something shared interpersonally. This is the key to understanding the philosophical debates of such things as the status of miracles, the authority of Scripture, and the possibility of civic history. In view of the difficulties of fitting these matters into the framework of traditional histories of philosophy, it is not so strange that even a figure of Vico’s stature either is ignored or is treated without much connection to the rest of
philosophical culture in the period. In connection with testimony and non-mentalistic ideas of knowledge, it would also repay to attend to what we may call the literary cultivation of memory in the form of the commonplace book, and the like, a combination of some relevance to Locke’s idea of personal identity.\textsuperscript{45}

Secondly, the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a revolution in the theory of language whose wider importance goes unacknowledged in the common history of philosophy. Already Samuel Pufendorf formulated the basic idea that reasoning is linguistic in nature, that language originates in social interaction, and that mental ratiocination as a consequence is derivative from social life.\textsuperscript{46} Furthermore, even as he formulated the classic theory of language as, at core, labels of ideas, John Locke admitted that some key elements in language could only be accounted for in functional, not referential, terms. However, it was Etienne Condillac who worked out a sophisticated theory of language as performative behaviour. In doing so, Condillac made it possible to make connections between language in the narrower sense and other forms of communicative behaviour which had been studied intensely for both their cognitive and practical significance, such as rhetoric, theatre, dance, music, and art. What is more, it was this approach to linguistic behaviour which helped philosophers in their attempts to understand folk culture and the ‘primitive’ mind.\textsuperscript{47}

In other words, it is necessary to set aside the epistemological paradigm in order to understand the philosophical discussions of ‘social’ forms of knowledge ranging from revealed religion and scriptural criticism through secular history to language, the arts and anthropology.
5. In the Absence of a Paradigm

These reflections are not meant to imply that there is no such thing as a ‘true’ concept of philosophy. The point is, rather, that if we want the history of philosophy to have a chance of being more than a collection of successful and unsuccessful illustrations of our own philosophical preconceptions, then we cannot let these preconceptions dictate what counts as philosophy irrespective of time and place. This does not mean that we can avoid the responsibility of seeing the past from our own present, nor that we cannot, or should not, ask a-historical or anachronistic questions of past works – for instance, whether an author understood what he was saying - if we think that this may ferret out content that otherwise would remain hidden. But that is very different from shaping the past, such as early modern philosophy, in the image of the present.

In writing the history of philosophy in general and that of the early-modern period in particular, we have a choice. We can begin with a more or less fixed notion of what philosophy is (persuaded, for example, by Kant or Reid) and proceed to find historical instantiations of and approximations to it. Or we can let the concept of philosophy itself be part of the object for historical investigation. In the former case, it is not clear in what sense the enterprise is history; in the latter case, it is an open question whether it has a more than locally identifiable object.

However, the latter choice, the way of history, does have its own philosophical rationale, namely a form of what Hume called ‘true scepticism.’ The point of such history is to query the predominant concept of philosophical history and to make the historical
coherence of the concept of philosophy itself into an object of historical investigation. It is not to deny the possibility of such coherence but to make it a fruitful question of empirical history. This mode of ‘philosophierende Geschichte der Philosophie’ is certainly critique but historical critique.
Notes


3 While Karl Ameriks may well be right that the interpretation of Kant’s own philosophy was distorted by Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and G.W.F. Hegel, I do not think that this was the case with the Kantian view of philosophical history; Ameriks, Kant and the Fate of Autonomy (Cambridge, 2000).
4 Schneider, *Philosophie und Universität*.


7 Immanuel Kant, ‘Logik Jäsche’, Ak 9: 32; translated in Kant, *Works/Lectures on Logic*, trans. J.M. Young, (1992). Kant gives three general overviews of the history of philosophy in the lectures as published, ‘Logik Blomberg’, Ak 24: 31-7; ‘Wiener Logik’, Ak 24: 800-804; and ‘Logik Jäsche’, Ak 9: 27-33; all in *Lectures*. In the first and earliest of these, from around 1770, Kant divides modern philosophy into dogmatic and critical, the latter represented by Locke. While Kant clearly drew on Jean Henri Samuel Formey’s *Kurzgefassete Historie der Philosophie*, (Berlin, 1763; first in French, Amsterdam 1760), it is Kant’s merit to bring Locke up to parity with Leibniz. Formey devotes only a few lines to Locke as a ‘logician’ in a work which is heavily dependent upon Brucker, including the latter’s perverse view that Wolff is the epitome of eclecticism.


12 Thomas Reid to James Gregory, 8 June 1783, in *The Correspondence of Thomas Reid*, ed. P.B. Wood (Edinburgh, 2002), 163.

13 Reid does not seem to have availed himself of any of the standard histories of philosophy. In *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, eds D. Brookes and K. Haakonsen (Edinburgh, 2002), 28, he refers to Brucker’s first major work, *Historia philosophica doctrinae de ideis* (Augsburg, 1723), but I know of no references to the
Reid’s engagement with the history of modern philosophy was so extensive that he toyed with James Gregory’s suggestion that he should turn this material into a separate work. See the letter referred to in note 11 and my Introduction to Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*.


18 Later he incorporated this into a world-historical scheme of cultural cycles.

19 Those, such as Hegel and Cousin, who made philosophy part of grand cycles of civilization would often find room for an ‘oriental’ epoch some time in the grey past, and as the middle ages became established as an object for philosophical scholarship, the Arab contribution began to be noticed.


26 Christian Garve’s Uebersicht der vornehmsten Principien der Sittenlehre (Breslau, 1798).


30 James Frederick Ferrier, Institutes of Metaphysics: The Theory of Knowing and Being (Edinburgh, 1854) in his Philosophical Works, 3 vols, eds A. Grand and E.L. Lushington (Edinburgh, 1875), 2: .

31 David Hume, Treatise of Human Nature, II.1.3; Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft, B xvi. I am indebted to Aaron Garrett for reminding me of this contrast.

therapy in Spinoza, see Aaron V. Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza’s Method* (Cambridge, 2003), esp. 86-93


34 Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments*.


See Richard Yeo’s suggestion that Enlightenment efforts to organize knowledge, such as Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia*, were closely connected to the commonplace book, ‘A Solution to the Multitude of Books: Ephraim Chalmers’s *Cyclopaedia* (1728) as ‘the Best Book in the Universe’’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64.1 (2003), 61-72.


In praise of anachronism, see Jonathan Rée, ‘The Vanity of Historicism’, *New Literary History* 22 (1991), 961-83; for testing authors’ self-comprehension, see my *Natural