

Philosophy and biography

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Abstract

Does the biography of a philosopher have any relevance to assessing their philosophy? After considering and rejecting three distinct treatments of this question, a different answer is articulated here. Distinguishing between the content and approach of a philosophical text, this article argues that biography is relevant to assessing the approach of the text in three ways: in its socio-historical context, its philosophical context, and its personal context in the life of the philosopher. Such a strategy offers new ways of comparing very different texts and assessing them in terms of the aims of the philosopher writing them.

KEYWORDS

approach, biography, compartmentalism, context, reductivism

1 | INTRODUCTION

Many people find the biography of philosophers fascinating. Wittgenstein is a good example. His life is intrinsically interesting. His family background of fabulous wealth and cultural accomplishment in Vienna; the suicide of three of his brothers; the family connections to Brahms and Klimt; his remaining brother's career as a (one-armed) pianist; his sisters' flight from the Nazis; his own disbursal of his wealth are all worthy of interest. Then there's his relationship with Russell and Cambridge; his ill-fated career as a primary-school teacher; his building a modernist house in Vienna; his working as a dispensary orderly at Guy's Hospital while holding the chair of philosophy at Cambridge; his living in seclusion in Norway and Connemara; his many friendships; his famous final utterance, "Tell them I've had a wonderful life." There's the curious tale of his publications—how he published the *Tractatus* (with difficulty) in 1922 but left the rest of his works to be published posthumously. Scholars are interested in the role of editors, translators, literary executors in the production and shape of the texts. Then there was a notorious debate about whether he was homosexual, reflecting the mores of a more conservative time, involving textual analysis of his notebooks. But is any of this relevant to his philosophy?

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If Wittgenstein is a major figure in the so-called Anglo-American tradition, Heidegger is a major figure in the European tradition. And his biography has also attracted much attention. It is less variegated and colourful than Wittgenstein's, but the central issue attracting attention is his relationship to the Nazis. He clearly sided with them as rector of Freiburg University in 1933, but it's unclear why he resigned the following year. He never unambiguously denounced them. He did remove the dedication to the Jewish philosopher Husserl in the second edition of *Being and Time*, and his relationship to the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt attracts attention. The Black Notebooks series that emerged posthumously seem to clearly show his antisemitism. Why or how is this relevant to his philosophy? Perhaps it is more obviously so than to Wittgenstein's, since authenticity is a major theme of Heidegger's work, and existentialism is strongly influenced by him. The worry that his own life involved venal, careerist, duplicitous, and prejudiced elements could well be relevant to an assessment of that work.

The flow of biographies of great philosophers continues unabated. Sue Prideaux wrote a prize-winning biography of Nietzsche in 2018. Cheryl Misak, well known for her work on pragmatism and positivism, wrote the first biography of the Cambridge philosopher Frank Ramsey in 2020. Tom Jones produced a new biography of George Berkeley in 2021, just as questions were emerging about his use of slaves in America in the 1720s. It is clear that philosophers, especially scholars of these figures, will read these works with interest and appreciation. But it remains an open question to what extent the biographical information and analysis has any relevance to a philosophical assessment of the figure under scrutiny.

There are two clearly defined and opposed responses to this question, which I discuss in section 2. In section 3 I discuss a different one, loosely inspired by the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein and exemplified in differing ways by James Conant (2001) and Ray Monk (1990). I suggest a further way of relating biography to philosophy in section 4, drawing a distinction between the approach and the content of a philosopher's work, and in section 5, examining the different ways in which biographical features can have an impact on the approach of the philosopher.

2 | TWO PROBLEMATIC RESPONSES

James Conant contributed a paper to a symposium in Virginia in 1999, which was subsequently published in *Wittgenstein: Biography and Philosophy* in 2001 by James C. Klagge. In this Conant raises the question whether biography can offer anything to a philosophical understanding of its subject. In the course of exploring this question he distinguishes two attitudes to biography and philosophy that he thinks mistaken. The first is Reductivism. This is where some feature of the philosopher's life is taken as a key to the rest of the work. The way this is done, however, is to treat the element chosen as a kind of external cause that doesn't really engage with the content of the philosophy. Conant's two examples of this are psychoanalytic readings and Marxist readings of various philosophers. He is not saying that psychoanalytic reconstructions of philosophers are mistaken or false, or that Marxist analyses are uninformative, but rather that the way they are deployed is frequently too insensitive and alien to the actual philosophy and the reading ends up being a travesty of both the philosophy and Marxism/psychoanalysis. Such analyses do exist, but they are not generally well received and are treated more as crank material than illuminating scholarship.

Conant thinks that in reaction to such answers the alternative of compartmentalism is more popular among philosophers, where biography is seen as irrelevant to an understanding of a philosopher's work. The compartmentalist rightly thinks that merely looking at causal analysis of how a philosopher came to think and act as she did (for example, "Wittgenstein was obsessed with issues of purity because of his childhood toilet training") is wrong. Furthermore, "there is something wrong with evaluating an author's work in terms of criteria drawn from

wholly outside that work” (Conant 2001, 18). Conant endorses these criticisms of reductivism yet wonders whether there is nevertheless a role for biography in a philosophical analysis of a philosopher's work. He uses two powerful examples to answer this affirmatively. The first is Socrates, who is distinctive in never having written. His life and philosophy are intertwined. Hence it seems impossible to consider Socrates' philosophy independently of his life. Conant goes on to reflect on Hellenistic philosophy, especially as mediated through the work of Pierre Hadot, where a philosopher's life is the definitive expression of his philosophy—the theoretical achieves its end and purpose in a form of life. Now Conant allows that someone may object that while this may have been true of ancient philosophy, it no longer accurately describes modern philosophy. But then he offers Wittgenstein as his second example. He points to several quotations from Wittgenstein, such as “Working in philosophy . . . is really more a working on oneself” (Wittgenstein 1980, 34/39), and he glosses this as saying that the spirit of the person shows itself in the spirit of their philosophy, which in turn shows itself in the way they philosophize. Conant does not want to establish a general thesis about the relation of philosophy to biography but argues that, at least in the case of Wittgenstein, to ignore biographical information is to miss out on something important for a philosophical understanding of his work. This is not to bring in a reductivist causal explanation but rather to engage with something integral and internal to the way Wittgenstein did philosophy.

3 | WITTGENSTEINIAN RESPONSES

Wittgenstein's views on logic, language, meaning, psychology, epistemology, and so on have been widely influential in the philosophical community. His views on the nature of philosophy have been less so, however, and indeed face vigorous resistance from different quarters (Hans-Johann Glock remarks that his view on philosophy “is generally considered to be the weakest part of Wittgenstein's later work” [Glock 1996, 294]). Wittgenstein articulated views in both his early and his later periods that differ markedly from the usual practice of advancing theses and making explicit arguments. The approaches of the *Tractatus* and *Investigations* both contrast with the kind of work produced by, for example, Frege, Russell, and most of the prior philosophical tradition. And interpretations of these works of Wittgenstein vary depending on how seriously they take his views on the nature of philosophy. For example, the resolute reading of the *Tractatus* takes seriously the view that the work is nonsensical and seeks to make sense of that peculiar claim, which is very different to the way, for example, Schlick or Carnap approached that work.

Conant's approach to philosophy is sympathetic to Wittgenstein's anti-systematic or therapeutic approach, and so his account of the relation of philosophy to biography is influenced by this. Conant isn't articulating a general claim or doesn't see his view as prescriptive for how things ought to be; he is rather being descriptive. He takes as examples Ray Monk's biographies of Wittgenstein and Russell, and shows the different ways in which one's life and one's conception of philosophy can interact. There is a relentlessness and consistency in Wittgenstein that contrasts with the dichotomies and fluctuations in Russell. The ambivalences in Russell's own life can be seen in his ambivalent conceptions of philosophy. Conant neither lauds nor condemns this feature of Russell's life and work but holds that a grasp of this deriving from the biography adds to the understanding of the philosopher. There is an evaluative dimension involved. The kind of understanding supported by biography pertains to the philosophy as a whole (not to specific interpretative queries or technical puzzles), and in the light of this understanding, Conant notes: “[T]he resulting change of aspect will be such that the philosopher's work will appear, as it were, to wax or wane as a whole” (Conant 2001, 37). Conant's essay is replete with such evaluative judgements—referring to Camus as a relatively inconsequential philosopher (35), speaking of Quine's autobiography as allowing glimpses of surface all the

way down (47), asserting, “By any discriminating person's lights, most attempts at philosophical biography must be judged failures” (40), approving Ernest Bloch's view of someone failing to hear a note's difference in a Bach chorale as not a musician with the devastating addendum “[T]here are many honourable trades. Shoemaking, for example” (41).

Wittgenstein's biographer, Ray Monk, articulates a somewhat different view on philosophical biography, but one that is also indebted to the philosophical views of the later Wittgenstein. He holds that there is a clear philosophical point to writing the biography of philosophers and also that the way to do it is clear. Biography helps one understand the tone in which something is said, and personal facts about the speaker can help with understanding what is being said (Monk 2001, 4). In a simple example, Monk says that the exclamation “There's a mouse under the chair” will be heard very differently if the tone is one of delight or horror. Monk thought that much of what Wittgenstein had actually said in his work was misinterpreted by philosophers engaging with it and that “[b]y seeing the connections between his spiritual and cultural concerns and his philosophical work, one might perhaps be able to read the latter in the spirit in which it was intended” (5). The way in which he thinks biography is to be done also owes much to Wittgenstein. It is a non-theoretical activity, it involves showing rather than saying. “Like Wittgenstein's later philosophy, it is descriptive rather than explanatory and this means that its elucidatory value is perpetually liable to remain elusive and misunderstood” (5). Monk cites Sartre's biography of Baudelaire as an example of a biography that relentlessly grinds out a theory, which says what Baudelaire is like and how he ought to be understood, rather than allowing the reader to discover this through description. To write a really great biography, Monk says, a certain amount of self-effacement is required (11); the writer must refrain from procrustean theorizing. The kind of understanding acquired thereby is akin to connoisseurship—it is not easily codifiable in rules and language, yet it picks out real features, which can be seen by other connoisseurs.

These insightful approaches to philosophical biography are alike in agreeing with a later Wittgensteinian approach to the way to do philosophy, the thing Glock had characterized as the weakest part of his oeuvre, but the one thought most important by those persuaded of it. One might resist this approach to philosophy yet still think there is something philosophically relevant about the biography of philosophers. But why resist it?

The approach seeks not to establish theories or doctrines but to win over the reader by its descriptive power and the obviousness of what is said. Here are three reasons to resist it. First, the unsystematic, therapeutic approach to philosophy has a huge substantive claim implicit in its practice, namely, that no positive constructive approach to philosophy is viable. All the philosophers of the canon who took themselves to be describing the deep nature of reality or stating the conditions of knowledge were not merely mistaken in their theories, the very project they undertook was wrong-headed. Why? Well, a general argument to show this would run foul of the desire to not make positive claims, so that's not available. Instead there is a piecemeal engagement with each position, attempting to show its misguidedness. Such a haphazard and ad hoc approach, however, is unlikely to be convincing to anyone not antecedently committed to the view—so the claim itself has little argumentative support, it is an item of faith, which might explain Glock's accurate assessment of its popularity.

Secondly, this act of faith, that every single positive constructive effort in philosophy is antecedently doomed to failure, raises the question of what counts as success or failure in philosophy. It seems clear that for someone like Carnap a major criterion of success is consensus, as in physical science, hence his dismissal of contested metaphysics as pseudo-philosophy. This is obviously challengeable as a criterion. Wittgenstein's own criteria for success in the early philosophy likewise seem debatable—the kind of crystalline purity he required in philosophy, as in life, was later rejected by him. And if that's the only kind of positive philosophy available, then it has to be unsystematic, deconstructive, philosophical therapy instead. But there may be other, messier, forms of systematic success on offer. So the criteria for being a

successful philosophy are up for grabs and don't force one to conclude that the history of the discipline is a history of failure. Finally, one of the motivations for resisting this approach is the tension apparent in holding this view as a teacher of philosophy. Wittgenstein is sensitive to this and wrestles with his identity as a professor, advising his students to work in factories or do something useful. Advocates of therapeutic Wittgensteinian philosophy in academia induct their philosophically innocent students into a discipline that they then seek to deconstruct. Why do this? Perhaps the tendency to think philosophically is ineradicable and so needs to be guarded against—but if it is ineradicable, this has something to say for a positive, constructive conception, perhaps the Aristotelian wonder-based approach. But even if it is true that the philosophical impulse is ineradicable, and that the negative view is correct, why then seek to perfect it or train others in it?

Advocates of Wittgensteinian philosophy have well-rehearsed answers ready for these challenges, but rather than getting bogged down in that battlefield, I think the very distinction between substantive philosophical views and the way in which one does philosophy is useful for making sense of the value of philosophical biography. So in the next section I would like to explore this distinction and in the following to argue that biography is relevant to making sense of and evaluating the way in which one does philosophy. And in so doing I attempt a non-Wittgensteinian treatment, that is, one which attempts to explain what the relationship between philosophy and biography is, clarifies the elements involved, and seeks for theoretical understanding of that relationship.

4 | APPROACH AND CONTENT

There are a multiplicity of different ways of conceiving of philosophy. In a fairly standard presentation to first-year students one might talk about reasoned argument, premises, conclusions, theses, refutations, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, logic. But there are many canonical philosophers who don't easily fit this picture, for example Wittgenstein, but also Derrida, Nagarjuna, Kierkegaard, Pascal, and the like. They resist the structure of formulated arguments, theses, positions advanced. And there are also whole traditions, or approaches, that operate in isolation from one another. There is still a big divide between those whose philosophical heroes are Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger and those who admire Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein. And this divide is not merely about whom one reads but about the purpose, methods, goals, and value of philosophy and how it relates to other disciplines.

There are disagreements about what the correct starting place for philosophy is. For some it is the world about them—dealing with mid-sized dry goods, as Austin put it. Aristotle takes this approach, as does Quine (starting in *medias res*). For others, however, the very existence of such things are in doubt. So Descartes believes he has to start with the data of consciousness as a way of short-circuiting sceptical doubt. Husserl has similar motivations for his phenomenological approach. Others still think that appeal to the data of consciousness is itself dubious—the mind being less accessible and more inscrutable than the world we share. Language is a shared social phenomenon, and so it should be the place to start doing philosophy.

What one might do with that starting place is also up for grabs. Are philosophical methods purely *a priori*, that is, purely rational cogitation, or do empirical inputs play a role? If so, how do they play a role? Is there a difference between philosophical and scientific method? Naturalistic philosophers emphasize the continuity with science, humanistic ones reject this. Should philosophy be systematic or can it be done piecemeal? What are the respective roles of analysis and synthesis? Are there foundations to be found or is it the coherence of the whole that guarantees truth and validity?

The results one seeks from philosophy are likewise controversial. Do we seek truth? Or do we seek clarification of meanings? Is there philosophical knowledge, a realm of

philosophical facts to be discovered? Or is the task of philosophy more about mental hygiene, in that it helps other folk in their pursuit of truth? Perhaps the point of philosophy is to stop the mistaken tendency to philosophize, or to clear the path for some other approach to truth—perhaps scientific, or theological. And this raises the issue of the relationship of philosophy to other disciplines—is it the queen of the sciences, or the underlabourer? How does it relate to, say, history? Should we just say no to the history of philosophy (as a famous Princeton philosopher allegedly put it), which is actually a subsection of history, or is history integral to philosophy in a way that it might not be to, say, chemistry? Should religious belief be sealed off from philosophy or is it legitimate to start with a religious stance and use philosophy to advance that?

Each of these issues—the starting place, method, goal, and relation to other disciplines—is contested. And so the background conception of what one is doing in philosophy can vary greatly between philosophers. And what is significant and interesting about this is how it can have an impact on what seem to be first-order disputes. A seemingly straightforward dialectical dispute can be rendered much more complex and problematic by attending to the background attitudes to the nature of philosophy. I have given an example of this elsewhere (see O'Grady 1999) in thinking about the debate between Carnap and Quine on analyticity.

So a useful distinction can be established between what can be called the approach of doing philosophy and the content of the philosophical position articulated in that approach. This is not a clear-cut distinction, as one might well think that views about approach constitute substantive, content-full, positions themselves; as Wittgenstein notes, “[T]here is no sharp boundary between methodological propositions and propositions within a method” (Wittgenstein 1969, 318). I think, however, that Wittgenstein's image, in *On Certainty*, of a river and its banks helps illuminate the distinction I am trying to make.

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other. (Wittgenstein 1969, secs. 96–97)

This seems like a contextual distinction. Assumptions about method, goals, starting places, relations may all be treated as objects of philosophical scrutiny, but always relative to other methodological assumptions. What one investigates and how one investigates may well be fluid over time, but typically there is a fixity in method and approach. Some philosophers answer the question “What is truth?” by looking at our use of language and examples of talk about truth, and others go to the great books and discuss the history of the development of the concept. This marks a clear difference in approach.

I want to argue that issues about biography are relevant to considering questions about the approach of doing philosophy. They are relevant in terms of understanding the purpose of an approach, for grasping why a philosopher operates in the way she does. But furthermore there is an important sense in which one can evaluate the success of an approach of philosophy in terms of a philosopher's biography. Given her goals, values, temperament, and circumstances, is the approach of philosophy appropriate to what she wants to achieve, does it actually succeed by her own lights? So not only is biography relevant to understanding what a philosopher does, it is also relevant to an evaluation of the success of what she is doing.

5 | BIOGRAPHY AND APPROACH

A fairly familiar move in philosophical debate is to challenge the framework or assumptions of one's opponent. Take, for example, one of the most-discussed arguments in the canon, Aquinas's argument for an unmoved mover (*Summa Theologiae* Ia q.2.a.3). It has often been challenged in a first-order way, as either begging the question or being invalid or making too big a jump in its conclusion. And defenders of Aquinas point out that it can avoid all of these objections if correctly interpreted in the context of the work and decry the hermeneutical violence of some of the criticisms. The notions of causality and of regress have to be correctly construed, the apparently over-reaching conclusion can be seen as a nominal definition to be fleshed out in subsequent discussions, distinctions between accidental and essential regress have to be made, counterexamples to the analysis of motion defused. When, however, all this dialectical labour is done, another move is to reject the framework within which Aquinas's argument is being discussed—that of medieval Aristotelianism. Perhaps it is incompatible with modern physics, or uses teleological notions which are outmoded, or appeals to notions of substance and essence that are rejected. This is a second-order rejection of the terms in which the first-order debate is framed. And it is to this second-order discussion—about how to construe philosophy, what counts as good philosophy, and how to make sense of method, goals, and appropriate argumentation that considerations relating to biography have relevance. I wish to propose a way of thinking about the context of a philosopher that highlights three salient factors. The first is the social-historical context, the second is the philosophical context, and the third is the personal context.

Social-historical context considers the philosopher in his general social and historical environment. To understand Socrates, for example, one needs to know something of the Greek city-state, the political environment, the class system, the Peloponnesian War. To understand Aquinas one needs to know about medieval university genres of writing, Christian doctrine, the Albigensians, Augustinian theology. Opponents of this view would claim that argument is argument and can be evaluated by the canons of logic without needless inquiry into history or society. To understand the terms of the argument, however, a great deal of scene-setting is required, and to ignore this is to frequently engage with straw targets—a common complaint against a certain kind of analytic approach. So a philosopher is a member of a society in a historical period, and this colours how they think about philosophy. Assumptions are the kinds of things that are taken for granted and are supplied by the social-historical context. Now one way of thinking about philosophy holds that nothing is taken for granted and everything is up for question. But this quickly runs to utter scepticism or to self-stultification; some things are always tacitly assumed. These can be simple common-sense or empirical matters—for example, Wittgenstein ridiculing the idea that anyone might walk on the moon (Wittgenstein 1969, sec. 286). Or they can be appeals to the science of the day—for example, Aquinas's frequent example of the role of the heat of the sun in sub-lunar causality. There are also more general social assumptions, say, about the role of women—recall the Oxbridge dictum about what item wears the trousers in an argument. Every philosopher holds some assumptions. They may be implicit or explicit but need to be acknowledged. And social-historical factors can influence philosophers positively or negatively. In the first half of the twentieth century Carnap wholeheartedly endorsed an international scientific culture. At the same time, Wittgenstein decried this culture and sought out places (such as Connemara) relatively untouched by it, to feel better able to philosophize.

Philosophical context is narrower and refers to specific views about philosophy held by the philosopher, frequently associated with her training, tradition, or teachers. One aspect of this is expectation of philosophy, what one thinks philosophy can achieve. For some it offers the possibility of providing truths about reality—indeed, the most important and profound truths. Aquinas says that even an imperfect grasp of such deep realities is a source

of great joy (“*iucundissimum est*”; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.8). Against this there are those who think that philosophy has the task of helping others in the pursuit of truth—being the underlabourer rather than the queen of the sciences. So rather than gaining truths about the deep nature of reality, philosophy clarifies issues about knowledge, logic, meaning that may arise in the sciences. Others deflate the conception of philosophy to its not even offering substantive views about logic, language, knowledge but dissolving spurious debates that arise about these issues. Sceptics of different kinds—classical Pyrrhonian or post-modern—seek to debunk false claims to knowledge without establishing new ones in their stead. Some think that philosophy should hand over its pretensions to knowledge to other disciplines—perhaps the natural sciences, perhaps social science, perhaps theology, perhaps mystical intuition.

This brings us to another aspect of the philosophical context, dialogue partner. Whom we think worthy of talking to shapes the way we do philosophy. If the main people we talk to are scientists, for example, then their methods and goals will play a significant role in how we do philosophy. Issues such as consensus, replicability, expert knowledge play important roles in science. Hence the worry of some philosophers about the lack of consensus in philosophy, what Kant referred to as a scandal. Likewise Carnap's main objection to traditional philosophy was the lack of a clear decision procedure. If the science is mathematical physics, then the formalization of the philosophy becomes important—this is less so with those who interact with biological sciences. And the question of the extent to which empirical data play a role in the philosophy is wide open. A different picture emerges if the dialogue partner is religion—whether Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or non-theistic religion. Politics again can shape things in a different way. Marxism seeks not to interpret the world but to change it. Those interested in ecology argue against what they see as the useless waste of energy in less important pursuits while our environment crashes. Rorty sees the basis of his edifying philosophy in his commitment to liberal democracy. So the philosophical context, the cluster of factors feeding into one's conception of the task, value and method of philosophy, will clearly shape the way one does philosophy. And this is typically not evident from the written texts but gleaned from biographical information.

Finally there is the personal context, the values and temperament of the philosophers. Values refer to a wider range of preference than moral issues. In this context philosophy has to do with what the philosopher finds important and worthy of investigation. The challenge levelled against certain kinds of analytic philosophy is their narrowness of focus. Some technical issue in philosophy of language, for example, can be the sustained focus of interest for a philosopher with little concern for larger issues. This is seen as valuable in itself. Why? Well, this tradition favours minute, close studies, it *values* them more than broader concerns. Others do not share this sense of value and find it hard to find the worth in such studies. Attempts may be made to connect the specific issue to larger issues, but may not. It depends on the conception of philosophy and what is valued. It might be technical precision and analytic focus, or it might be larger concerns about the meaning of life. Frequently people outside philosophy are surprised at the lack of concern for larger existential issues by philosophers who restrict their academic focus to technical issues. There is likely something to be said here about the sociology of the research university and the prestige of the physical sciences. Scott Soames notes that contemporary analytic philosophy “has become an aggregate of related but semi-independent investigations, very much like other academic disciplines” and “gone are the days of large central figures, whose work is accessible and relevant to, as well as read by, all analytic philosophers. Philosophy has become a highly specialized discipline, done by specialists primarily for other specialists” (Soames 2003, 463). Alisdair MacIntyre comments on this: “The fragmentation of enquiry and the fragmentation of understanding are taken for granted” (MacIntyre 2009, 18), a move that he challenges, on the basis of a different set of values. What one thinks important shapes one's philosophy.

And this leads to thinking about temperament. This is the realm of individual interests, preferences, inclinations. It shapes what one thinks worthy of pursuing, what questions are the important ones. Richard Foley, in a recent study of the differences between the humanities and the sciences, points out: “In the humanities, the questions are in general ones that don’t admit of definitive answers. They’re open ended. They’re ones to which different ages, different cultures, and different individuals must fashion answers appropriate for their circumstances” (Foley 2019, 62). Temperament drives the interest behind such questioning, and it also shapes the ways of answering them. Various philosophers in the past have adverted to the role of temperament in doing philosophy—such as William James and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. And it’s not a question of reducing the interest, worth, or indeed truth of a philosophical position to the temperament of its producer but rather of how it plays a role in the way the positions are developed.

Taken together, this cluster of contexts offers a pathway into understanding why philosophers operate the way they do, what their goals and aims are, and how their philosophies reflect such goals and aims. One can think of Carnap’s work in formal philosophy, his development of linguistic frameworks, as being decisively shaped by his admiration of physical science and its methods (social-historical context). His philosophical mentors admired scientific philosophy, and his interlocutors were physicists, logicians, and mathematicians (philosophical context). His personal distaste for traditional philosophical debate and his irenicism clearly influenced his espousal of tolerance of a variety of language forms (personal context). Wittgenstein reacted against the same social-historical environment, disliking the influence of science in philosophy. He reacted against Russellian scientific philosophy and scandalized the Vienna Circle with his liking of Tolstoy, Tagore, Augustine, and other religiously oriented figures. His values and temperament were significantly different to Carnap’s. While it is possible to read the *Aufbau* and the *Tractatus* without knowing anything of the philosophers who produced them, such an approach results in a significantly impoverished appreciation of those works and in interpretations that the authors would fail to recognize. Grasping the social-historical circumstances, the proximate philosophical context, and the personal values and preferences collectively allows us to develop deeper assessments of philosophical works. And this is a serious way in which biography is connected to philosophy.

6 | CONCLUSION

Having rejected both reductionism and compartmentalism, but also the Wittgensteinian answer of Monk and Conant, I have suggested here a different way of thinking about the role of biography. Rather than feeding directly into first-order debates, it feeds instead into the background or second-order conception of philosophy that shapes how such first-order debates are conducted. What use is such an investigation?

First of all, it offers a way of thinking about philosophers or systems of philosophy that respects them on their own terms and doesn’t seek to colonize or reduce them to a procrustean model. It respects the specificities of mode of presentation, is sensitive to the wide contexts that feed into the work, and thinks of approach as not being separable from content. Secondly, it allows for comparison between such different approaches, since there is a common factor in each case, the person of the philosopher and how the philosophy relates to the goals, values, and aspirations of that person. This can only be done with knowledge of the biography of the philosopher. Thirdly, it suggests a new mode of evaluation for philosophical texts—does the philosophy succeed in the terms established by the philosopher, does it help them achieve their goals? These goals are discoverable by examining the biographical context of the writer. And finally, it offers a framework for self-reflection for us contemporary practitioners. Why do we do philosophy the way we do, who are our heroes and heroines, what issues motivate and

galvanize us? Given the variety of options available, can we give a rationale for the choices implicit in our practices? It seems that, as a matter of fact, many of us adopt a way of doing philosophy that is not fully reflected on but is a function of education and contingent factors such as current interests, fashions, and funding opportunities. Given that philosophy is a human activity generated by persons, looking at the way in which the person interacts with the philosophy can only deepen our understanding of what we are doing as philosophers.

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