

COMMENTARY: STÄUDLIN AND THE
HISTORIOGRAPHY OF PHILOSOPHY

The historiography of philosophy presents many difficulties to anybody addressing its more general features. How easy it would be if we had only one skeptic philosopher—who calls himself a skeptic or is believed to be one—and just one "other" philosopher who is not a skeptic or at least does not want to be known as such. The third person would be the historian of philosophy who informs us about what befalls the skeptic philosopher and his skepticism. Does he have many followers or many critics or both? Does he stick to his opinions throughout his life or does he change them? Is he ignored by the other philosopher or rather criticized by him? The historian would report all of this to us; we would read his story and be in a position to discuss it, to compare it with the skeptic's own writings and with those of his opponent, and so on. Unfortunately, this ideal constellation does not exist. History is more complex; the historians of philosophy reporting on skepticism have to deal with several skeptical philosophers—self-declared or suspected—from ancient and modern times, and with various theories of skepticism—apologetic and polemic, prompted by religious, scientific or other considerations. Most importantly, historians of philosophy are not a third party. This can be learned from Stäudlin's *History of Skepticism*.

In the introduction to this work Stäudlin says that he does not intend to encourage skepticism. His historical account, as Popkin rightly emphasizes, covers everything relevant from ancient times up to his own, but this account is also meant to facilitate the refutation of skepticism. One can fight more effectively, according to Stäudlin, when one knows the enemy's strength as precisely as possible.¹ Stäudlin did not use this justification as a historian, as again Popkin points out, but as someone who responded to the political and moral turmoil of German society after 1789. Popkin quotes Stäudlin as saying that he was the first one to use "historical materials to illuminate the skeptical predicament of the time." But one wonders how far Stäudlin's reaction differed from that of other German Protestant church men who also looked for ideological and even philosophical motivations behind social unrest. They, too, spoke the language of political warfare and

¹ Carl Friedrich Stäudlin, *Geschichte und Geist des Skepticismus vorzüglich in Rücksicht auf Moral und Religion*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1794), 1:ix f.

considered intellectuals of all times as the enemies of social stability.² Clearly, Stäudlin was more than just a bookish historian of philosophy (*Büchergeschichte*) inasmuch as he shared with his fellow Germans the urge to be heard as an intellectual.

Nevertheless, Stäudlin had no overt political intention. In his introductory treatise on the nature, origins, and consequences of skepticism he wrote that his history should be regarded as a contribution to the history of humankind and, more specifically, to the history of philosophy. Accordingly, we may consider Stäudlin a historian of philosophy and his book a proper history of philosophy. His many later works on the history of moral philosophy (Christian, Jewish, and others from various eras) were also close to aspects of the history of philosophy although less so than his early history on skepticism. Stäudlin boasted that in regard to philosophical skepticism his work opened up a new chapter in the history of philosophy even when he also admitted that in the writings of Sextus Empiricus, Cicero, Bayle, and others much of the evidence was readily available. The fact that Stäudlin was not an academic philosopher was not exceptional among historians of philosophy around 1800. Johann Christoph Adelung was a librarian, Samuel Formey a secretary of the Prussian Academy, Friedrich Ast a philologist, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, like Stäudlin, a theologian. Even the majority of the academic philosophers among the historians of philosophy (Christoph Meiners, Dietrich Tiedemann, Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann, to name just the most important) did not, at this early stage, turn the history of philosophy into an academic discipline.

Until the mid-nineteenth century the practice of writing histories of philosophy was by no means contrary to non-"historicist" goals. A legacy from the *historia literaria* tradition, histories of philosophy included not only non-philosophical information but often highlighted the cultural, religious, or scientific makeup of philosophical activities.³ Stäudlin's goal of refuting skepticism by recording its history was therefore not unusual in his time. While his work took the form of a historical account, his interest in the history of philosophy was not historical in the professional sense. This way of writing history also entailed the expression of retrospect judgments. Friedrich Bouterwek, for instance, Stäudlin's colleague as professor of moral philosophy in Göttingen after 1810, in an essay on the stages of reason designated *philosophical reason* (*philosophische Vernunft*) as its modern version.⁴ Such a perspective was very common around 1800: philosophy as a part of human reason was to be addressed from its present state.

Today we are inclined to denounce the mixture of historical interest with other interests. Aware of how difficult it is to be historically "pure," we are suspicious of claims of impartiality. We know full well that judgments and opinions are hidden

² Edward D. Junkin, *Religion versus Revolution: The Interpretation of the French Revolution by German Protestant Churchmen, 1789-1799* (diss. Basel, 1968; Austin, TX, 1974)

³ Lucien Braun called it the "pragmatic approach." Braun, *L'histoire de l'histoire de la philosophie* (Strasbourg, 1973).

⁴ Friedrich Bouterwek, *Die Epochen der Vernunft nach der Idee einer Apodiktik* (Göttingen, 1802).

in even the most historicist account. What we can learn from Stäudlin's case is that at the beginning of modern intellectual historiography holding extra-historical views was not only considered unavoidable, but that this was inextricably linked to the entire endeavor of the writing of (this kind of) history. Historical purism and positivism came later. There are few lines in a history of philosophy which cannot be read without the author's intentions, cultural context, and many other considerations in mind. A double reading must therefore be applied: on one hand, we take histories of philosophy mostly as books containing information about philosophy and philosophers in the way that Popkin admits that he has used Stäudlin "occasionally as a reference source." On the other hand, we also discover the author's intentions. And there we usually stop, thinking of the information and the author's intention as two more or less unrelated things.

But Chris Laursen makes clear how fruitful it can be to closely examine the author's intentions and presuppositions. Laursen tells us that Stäudlin balanced Kantianism, his Christian faith, and skepticism. This balance was Stäudlin's personal act, and therefore to be found both in his *History of Skepticism* and his *History of Moral Philosophy* of 1822. In both works we find Stäudlin presenting a *modus vivendi* with skeptical doubt. Laursen characterizes Stäudlin's historiography as a successful "Christian enterprise" because neither skepticism nor the diversity of moral philosophy really questioned Christianity. Laursen quotes Stäudlin to the effect that the history of philosophy itself was used as a traditional skeptical argument. It follows that Stäudlin's historical treatment is capable of proving the harmlessness of skepticism.

Laursen's conclusions eventually lead us to explain Stäudlin's historiography as instrumental to his concerns as a Christian. Calling Stäudlin a skeptic "malgré lui," however, leaves little room for the idea that someone as intelligent as he was could not take intellectual pride in writing at great length about something only for the sake of refuting it. The very nature of his text suggests another and wider "context" than only his intentions. Why did Stäudlin write a history of skepticism in the first place? What is a history of skepticism as opposed to a refutation or a criticism of skepticism? What remains of Stäudlin's history when cut off from the introductory essay on the nature of skepticism? Constance Blackwell offers some remarks which go in the direction of an answer to these questions. Blackwell states that both Brucker and Stäudlin used skepticism in order "to recount the dynamic way philosophy developed," and that both men defined skepticism as "a method of criticism which helped drive philosophy" with Brucker concentrating on natural philosophy and Stäudlin on philosophical argumentation.

The comparison between Brucker and Stäudlin is very helpful. In his voluminous *Historia critica* the Augsburg pastor accumulated so much material that for quite some time no emendation seemed possible. Probably, only Tennemann's history of philosophy made Brucker obsolete. Published between 1798 and 1819 in eleven volumes, Tennemann's work came somewhat close in terms of material evidence to Brucker's six volumes in quarto published for the last time in 1767. To put it more carefully, Brucker was not so much outdated by just another historian, but by a different and widespread interest in the history of philosophy which

emerged in Germany in the late 1760s and continued until 1800 and throughout the nineteenth century. As a participant in this movement Stäudlin was by no means unique, as Brucker had previously been, but he was exceptional in writing a history of skepticism. In late eighteenth-century German culture something like a collective enterprise was trying to make sense out of the whole of philosophy's history, subordinating its various elements under a single (but not simplistic) perspective. Without describing in exact detail how the pragmatic approach and the narrative form of philosophical historiography developed,⁵ it is clear that the history of philosophy came to be seen as a whole—not, as with Brucker, as the totality of philosophy, but as its entire history. For late eighteenth-century historians of philosophy cultural and social conditions constituted the context of all intellectual activities including philosophy. Implied was that all these activities, intellectual and other, were human activities and that anthropology was the key for understanding even the most complex products of the mind.

This argument was decisive in the case of skepticism as we can learn from Stäudlin's approach. If skepticism were regarded only as a philosophical position, he wrote, that perception would be confirmed in discussions, declarations for and against, and also in histories of philosophy. In the introductory essay Stäudlin called this procedure the "assessment of skepticism as an art" (*Kunst*). This was for him the objective view point in which skepticism was identified with a set of arguments. The moment, however, in which one begins to view skepticism less as a philosophical position and more as an element of the thought process itself—something essential to all forms of philosophizing—discussions and declarations lost much of their relevance and the historical treatment of skepticism changed radically. Stäudlin called this perspective the "assessment of skepticism as a state of mind" (*Zustand*). Both Brucker and Stäudlin could have learned about the distinction between the skeptical position and doubting from their reading of Bayle. But for Stäudlin skepticism was an anthropological rather than a merely historical problem. This change of perspective reflects on Brucker and others who dealt with the history of philosophy in order to attempt a definition of *philosophy* itself. Later in the century more importance was attached to the question what really constituted the *history* of philosophy. Skepticism was now seen as a general (anthropological) phenomenon, as an element of philosophical reasoning and not only as a particular method of arguing about the existence or plausibility of things.

Histories of philosophy acquired a distinctive new feature when they were seen as focusing on the origins and the circumstances of the thought process. Only in the nineteenth century histories of philosophy were also written for instructional purposes thereby acquiring a specific function distinct from its openly anthropological interest.⁶ There is a telling incident for the novelty of this interest. Tenne-

⁵ Ulrich Johannes Schneider, *Die Vergangenheit des Geistes: Eine Archäologie der Philosophiegeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main, 1990).

⁶ Schneider, "A Bibliography of Nineteenth-Century Histories of Philosophy in German, English, and French," *Storia della Storiografia*, 21 (1992), 141-69; "Philosophy Teaching in Nineteenth-Century Germany," *History of Universities*, ed. Laurence Brockliss (1993), 197-338.

mann, looking back in 1795 on recent works on the history of philosophy, deplored the fact that so few of their authors had given a definition of philosophy. When he began writing one himself in 1798, however, he explained in the lengthy preface that one could not expect a definition of philosophy from a historian of philosophy.⁷ At that time the history of philosophy had become for Tennemann anything that motivated, hindered, and furthered philosophy, that what made it systematic or radical, etc.

The implications of this new approach are visible, although indirectly, in Stäudlin's confession that writing his *History of Skepticism* had not been easy. In the preface as well as in an autobiographical fragment published after his death he told his readers about his reluctance to spell out the doubts and disbeliefs of famous thinkers. When he admitted that he had panicked and feared that he was becoming a skeptic himself one should keep in mind what he told his readers in his *History of Christian Morals* in which he connected the writing of this book to the opposing feelings of consolation and elevation.⁸ Apparently, the modern historian of philosophy could not use his insight into human nature and at the same time distance himself from his topic. If whatever is "historical" is "human," the historical object is also the subject. It was the very success of the "pragmatic," or anthropological understanding of the history of philosophy which made author and reader involved in its each and every step. A loss of distance was implied in the treatment of skepticism as an element of (the development) of philosophy itself. The anthropological understanding of skepticism basically contradicted older ways of describing philosophical positions, among them skepticism. But it still allowed for the positioning of philosophical skeptics modeling them as productive historical forces. Moreover, on the basis of this understanding the historian of philosophy was free to accept some degree of skepticism. It thus makes sense when Laursen calls Stäudlin a skeptic. Stäudlin was a skeptic to the degree that his own *History* allowed him to be. By contrast, Brucker could advocate only historical, not philosophical skepticism. He still had to distance himself, and he did so successfully, I believe, as an eclectic philosopher.⁹

Stäudlin's *History of Skepticism* is thus a fine example of modern intellectual historiography which is simultaneously "presentist" and "empathic." Stäudlin aimed at a genealogy of skeptical thinking and his *History* was not only a diagnosis but also a cure for what he called in its very first sentence "the disease of the century." However, he did not want to further philosophy by his analysis of skepticism and this is one of the shortcomings of his enterprise. As far as his understanding of

⁷ Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann, "Übersicht des Vorzüglichsten, was für die Geschichte der Philosophie seit 1780 geleistet worden," Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, ed. *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft deutscher Gelehrten*, 2.4 (1795); *Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1798), xxix.

⁸ *Zur Erinnerung an D. Carl Friedrich Stäudlin... seine Selbstbiographie nebst einer Gedächtnisspredigt*, ed. J.T. Hemsén (Göttingen, 1826), 14; Stäudlin, *Geschichte der christlichen Moral* (Göttingen, 1808), viii.

⁹ Schneider, "Das Eklektizismus-Problem der Philosophiegeschichte," *Johann Jakob Brucker*, ed. Theo Stammen and Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Augsburg, 1996), forthcoming.

doubt and disbelief went, it stopped short of any kind of logical appreciation of skepticism thus missing a point philosophers themselves like to take more seriously. Hegel in an essay on skepticism from 1802, in which he argued the case that philosophy cannot do without skepticism and that to philosophize always implies skeptical thinking of some sort, also commented on Stäudlin. Because Stäudlin did not take the philosopher's stand, Hegel denounced his book as superficial.¹⁰ If there is some value in this dismissal, it probably lies in the fact that any "pragmatic" or anthropological approach of the history of philosophy is bound to remain fairly general unless it adopts further criteria for respecting theoretical differences within the various contexts of intellectual history. On one hand, skepticism or even the whole of philosophy becomes better understandable by making it psychologically plausible, on the other hand there is no way of explaining philosophical viability. In his introductory essay, Stäudlin counted the history of philosophy among the sources of skepticism because the mere knowledge about opposing philosophical views would trouble any simple mind. Turning this statement round would enable us to say that for more complex minds troubles only will arise when we enter even deeper into the history of philosophy by not merely understanding the arguments but also validating them. In doing so, of course, we would transform the history of philosophy into a subdiscipline of philosophy itself and thereby lose the common ground with Stäudlin and his contemporaries.

¹⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, "Verhältnis des Skeptizismus zur Philosophie," in F.W.J. Schelling and G.W.F. Hegel, eds., *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie* (Tübingen, 1802).