What Counted as Philosophy in the Italian Renaissance? The History of Philosophy, the History of Science, and Styles of Life

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Christopher S. Celenza

After he summed up the teaching and life of Marsilio Ficino, the Italian Renaissance’s leading Platonic philosopher, here is what Johann Jakob Brucker wrote:

From this short history of Ficino’s life, we consider it established, for anyone who is even somewhat attentive, that Ficino did not lack learning, and that, on account of his erudition, he was deserving of praise that the censure of learned men has denied him. But it cannot be denied that, among philosophers, this man, who spent his entire life philosophizing, obtained an entirely humble rank. The mental condition set out above, the way he philosophized, corrupted by prejudices and superstition, and the very genre of philosophy to which he devoted himself, makes this clear to those judging the matter rightly. . . . Entirely captivated by the trifles of later Platonists, he feigns, re-feigns, and changes Plato, as we have seen.¹

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.


Ex hoc brevi Ficini vitae historia cuiuslibet mediocriter attento constare arbitramur, non defuisse Ficino doctrinam, et meruisse eum laudes, quas ei ob eruditionem detulit virorum doctorum censura. Ast negari quoque non potest, inter philosophos virum hunc, qui totam vitam suam philosophando consumpsit, humilem omnino locum obtinuisset. Id quod et animi conditio supra exposita, et philosophandi ratio, praeiudiciis et superstitione corrupta, ipsumque philoso-
In this work, the *Historia critica philosophiae* (1740), Brucker is rightly regarded as the first modern historian of philosophy. His comments about Ficino tell us a lot about the enterprise of the history of philosophy, its canons, and its guiding assumptions. They can also help us understand why fifteenth-century intellectual history has traditionally played such a small part in the history of philosophy. Ficino represents one of the fifteenth century’s most important philosophers and certainly one whose work, if often subterraneously, had significant influence in succeeding centuries. Why did Brucker deem Ficino of such little worth as a philosopher?

Brucker was writing as philosophy underwent a transformation that began with René Descartes, or at least was retrospectively believed to have done so. This transformation narrowed philosophy’s scope, as natural philosophy (what became natural science) separated itself from philo-

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phy as a whole. Along with the separation of natural philosophy from philosophy (a development, needless to say, that postdated all fifteenth-century humanists), there also came a gradual turning away from the notion of philosophy as a style of life. Instead of a multifaceted art in which self-control was cultivated, exemplarity was privileged in historical writing, and the secrets of living well were thought to reside, philosophy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries became a field that concerned itself ever more with epistemology—concerned itself, that is, with the question of how a formally distinct, substantially individual mind could know things about and within an exterior world to which it was fundamentally unconnected.⁴

Brucker represents the beginnings of the written codification of this transformation. Philosophy, Brucker believed, had to do with the pure exercise of human reason, and the history of philosophy should reflect this notion; it should reflect, that is, the evolution and practice of this ideal. His primary task, he suggests, is to write the history of philosophy, using authentic sources, in such a way that what was “systematic” in the thought of past thinkers would be drawn out and form the basis of his narrative: “So that, therefore, a sound, correct judgment might be able to be drawn out of the [expressed] opinion of philosophers, an entire system must be excavated from their writings, to such an extent that, above all else, the general principles may be excavated that, like a foundation, underlay the entire edifice of their teachings. It is with these general principles, finally, that those very conclusions may be erected that flow freely from those sources.”⁵

Brucker operated in a “progressive” fashion, taking what in his own contemporary moment were seen as the building blocks of philosophy and, in his history writing, seeking out those elements that most closely formed part of the evolution of that conception. Brucker will serve, in the first part of this study, as a point of departure to examine the evolution of certain dominant themes in the writing of the history of philosophy, even as the history of philosophy is discussed within another disciplinary historiography, that of the history of science. Thereafter, the focus will turn to

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⁵. Brucker, *Historia critica philosophiae a mundi incunabulis ad nostram usque aetatem deducta*, i:15: “Ut itaque de sententia philosophorum sanum rectumque iudicium ferri queat, totum ex eorum scriptis systema ita eruendum est, ut ante omnia principia generalia, quae fundamenti loco toti doctrinarum aedifici subiciuntur, eruantur, et his demum illae superstruantur conclusiones quae ex istis fontibus sponte sua fluunt.”
the different ways in which the history of philosophy was conceived in Italy’s long fifteenth century.

1. Brucker, the “Progressive” Style, and the Historiography of Science

Why is Brucker important in this story? There are at least four reasons. First, one can trace an intellectual genealogy from Brucker to the great, classic modern historians of philosophy: to Rolf Tiedemann and Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann, to Louis Cousin, Friedrich Ueberweg, and Eduard Zeller, to Wilhelm Windelband, to Rodolfo Mondolfo and to Nicola Abbagnano, which indeed brings us into the twentieth century.6

Second, it was in Brucker’s era that a canon of philosophers was created. Brucker himself was open about his central concerns and treated a wide variety of thinkers. Still, it takes a moment of reflection, and a glance at one of any number of present-day histories of philosophy, to realize that a canon of premodern philosophers was created in Brucker’s day. That canon runs something like this (in a deliberately schematic form): First there were the Presocratics, then Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Hellenistic schools (Stoicism, Skepticism, Epicureanism), followed by a period of cultural translation whereby these Greek achievements became known to the Romans through Cicero. The rise of Christianity occurs, in some accounts tainting the speculative achievements of the ancients with religion. “Neoplatonism” with (a remarkably nonreligious) Plotinus as exemplary is next (with some attention paid thence to Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus). Augustine receives his due. The ps.-Dionysius follows. Boethius writes the Consolation of Philosophy and translates certain key works of Aristotelian logic into Latin. Darkness ensues, broken only by Scotus Eriugena, the translator of the ps.-Dionysius. Next, one observes the emergence of “high medieval thought”. Anselm of Laon, Peter Abelard, and the “Platonizing” School of Chartres, with only a nod to John of Salisbury, since, after all, he actually objected in his Metalogicon to the aridity of the work of certain of his contemporaries. “Scholasticism” emerges, universities are formed; Thomas Aquinas is the central figure, though Bonaventure and Albert the Great will have been mentioned. It is noted that Aquinas considered himself first and foremost a theologian and that he saw philosophy to be in the service of Christianity; still, the canonical history will treat only what is “properly” philosophical in his thought. A parenthesis: “Islamic” and “Jewish” philosophies are noted, perhaps before, perhaps

after “scholasticism.” Duns Scotus and William of Ockham are next, followed by a skeptic like John Buridan and then the Oxford calculators. Perhaps mysticism will be noted, though it too is not “really” philosophical. Late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century humanism is noted as important, since it helped in the recovery of classical texts. The humanists themselves, however, were not philosophers. Thereafter different historians of philosophy will mention different thinkers, but the next canonical character is Descartes, with whom the long arc of modern philosophy can be said to begin. There is a long caesura in most histories of philosophy between the era of Ockham and that of Descartes; and even when authors or editors approach the history of philosophy topically, the set of thinkers who count as philosophers is relatively uniform.

It should be said that many have worked beyond that schematic canon. Scholars such as John Inglis, Jack Zupko, John Marenbon, and numerous others actively work to integrate medieval philosophy’s diverse contexts, from the geographical to the institutional. Moreover, post-World War II scholarship has included numerous attempts to confront the gap between Ockham and Descartes, though none has yet succeeded in raising any fifteenth-century thinker to the kind of canonical status enjoyed by those two thinkers. If we return to summary statements or monographs on medieval philosophy, the thinkers treated will be more or less the same if one looks at the most recent histories of philosophy, from Julius Weinberg and Armand Maurer, to Marenbon and Anthony Kenny (to restrict the range to Anglophone histories).


9. See Julius R. Weinberg, A Short History of Medieval Philosophy (Princeton, N.J., 1964); Armand Maurer, Medieval Philosophy (Toronto, 1982); Marenbon, Medieval Philosophy: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction (London, 2007); and Anthony Kenny, Medieval Philosophy, vol. 2 of A New History of Western Philosophy (Oxford, 2005), which is organized according to themes as are The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy, ed. A. S.
Those authors, as well as many others unnamed, have different perspectives on how to do the history of philosophy: Weinberg and Maurer, part of an older generation, are interested in context; Kenny represents an “analytic” reading of the history of philosophy concerned primarily with verbal arguments shorn of historical context; Marenbon, a kind of middle way. Most notable, however, is the fact that, whatever their diverse approaches to writing the history of philosophy, the canon of thinkers, those who really count as philosophers, is basically the same. If, in other words, a thinker was not part of a canon of “properly philosophical” philosophers that was invented in the eighteenth century and solidified in the nineteenth, he or she has a slight chance of getting a hearing. There is nothing sinister about this process. Histories of philosophy represent, as much as anything else, a pedagogical genre of writing. Intentionally synthetic, these studies are used as reference books, both for scholars and teachers. That realm of writing is inherently conservative, and change occurs slowly. Yet, it is time to ask whether an essentially eighteenth-century canon is the best framework around which to build the history of philosophy.

A third reason that Brucker is significant is that he was both symptom and cause of common opinion in his day. He was at the forefront of a movement that a number of scholars, Eugenio Garin among them, highlighted: the eighteenth-century shift in the historiography of philosophy, which saw historians of philosophy change their fundamental perspective from one of schools (or successions or sects) to one of systems.10 The older, schools model finds its most powerful ancient expression in Diogenes Laertius’s Lives of the Philosophers, whereby a great initial thinker is posited, whose thought can be reduced to certain fundamental ideas, and then his followers (members of his school) are treated.11 This tradition conti-
ued into late antiquity and the Middle Ages. In its dual attention to both style of life and doctrine, the schools model is concerned first and foremost with lived ethics. It is inevitable that when, as in Diogenes Laertius, the philosopher’s verbal arguments come last in the account and seem to take a back seat to the philosopher’s bios (life), the effect of the schools model is to focus on conduct first.

The new model, well expressed in the above-noted quotation from Brucker, sought to document the evolution of philosophical systems. Instead of presenting the history of philosophy as a panoply of different styles of life (schools, sects), buttressed by different intellectual techniques and methods, proponents of the new version of the history of philosophy sought to document the evolution of philosophy as sets of discrete systems of ideas. In its most extreme form, Hegelianism, philosophy’s progress seemed coextensive with the progress of the human spirit. Still, one did not have to be an avowed Hegelian to have been affected by this basic sea change (from the ethical/biographical to the doctrinal) in the historiography of philosophy.

It is precisely for this reason, and within this framework, that we can appreciate Brucker’s evaluation of Ficino. In Brucker’s eyes, Ficino attained a “humble rank,” “corrupted by prejudices and superstition” as he was. Brucker also tells us that Ficino was “captivated by the trifles of later Platonists” and that because of this allegiance to later Platonism Ficino wound up “feigning” and “changing” Plato. Brucker also reveals obliquely that Ficino’s reputation had declined, that he did indeed deserve some praise for his erudition, even if other learned men have denied him his admittedly small share. “Eclecticism” for Brucker was a good thing; an eclectic philosopher, who mixed together doctrines from many different schools, could also be systematic, provided he had the individual vision and mental discipline to carry it out. Syncretism, however, was another story. For Brucker, Ficino (like Pico della Mirandola, for that matter) was
not eclectic but syncretic; his thought represented a mixture of elements that really could not essentially be mixed, combined as they were by an undisciplined mind in an unsystematic fashion. Ficino therefore does not really count as a good, authentic philosopher (though Brucker takes care to stress that Ficino was a person of good character). This judgment about what was and what was not systematic in the context of philosophy informed Brucker’s views about the history of philosophy, so that not only fifteenth-century thought but also later Platonism (especially post-Plotinus) received the same sort of judgment.

The fourth reason for Brucker’s importance is represented by the idealist vision of the history of philosophy, teleological and progressivist—so alive in Brucker’s day—that wove its way into the teaching of the history of philosophy in the nineteenth century in Germany. The rise and prevalence of what one might loosely call a German model in the institutional organization, prestige, and focal points of higher education in Europe in the nineteenth century led to different developments. Regarding the history of philosophy, the German model meant that the canons of thinkers created by practitioners of this style of the history of philosophy became ever more fixed by the naturally conservative processes of higher education. Gabrielle Lingelbach has offered warnings against assuming homogeneity both within German university culture and with respect to how what was perceived as the German university model was accepted and implemented throughout continental Europe. Still, it cannot be denied that a certain amount of prestige was associated with what were assumed to be German methods, and for good reason. Centralized, rather than college-based, faculties and devoted commitment to scholarship as vocation allowed for scholarship that was as profound as its leaders were productive. Along with this prestige came leadership in a number of fields, and one of these was the writing of the history of philosophy after Brucker.

18. See Celenza, “Lorenzo Valla and the Traditions and Transmissions of Philosophy,” for a fuller statement, some of which is repeated here. As the nineteenth century wore on, German universities increased the teaching of the history of philosophy in philosophy curricula; see Schneider, *Philosophie und Universität*, pp. 103–14.
20. Brucker, in the preface to the second edition of his masterpiece, informs readers that
The idealist, progressivist vision of the history of philosophy was shaped in such a way that it left out certain periods from the history of thought, designating them unphilosophical. The long fifteenth century in Italy is just such a period. Historiographic tendencies to focus on metaphysics rather than ethics, certain epistemologies rather than (sometimes ambiguous) dialogic stimulation, and verbal argumentation rather than social practice meant that much of fifteenth-century humanism’s contribution to philosophy was undervalued; for it was precisely to ethics, dialogue, and the marriage of literary ideals with social practice that the most creative minds in the Italian fifteenth century turned.

Italian “humanists” can be understood in many ways: empirically, as a set of people who, over a broad period, implicitly or explicitly devoted themselves to the five verbal subjects of grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy (according to the famous definition of Paul Oskar Kristeller); or, and again empirically, they can be understood as a group of thinkers who, from the later thirteenth century, shared the common denominator of attempting to write classicizing Latin (as Ronald G. Witt has framed the problem). Less empirically, one can look among the members of those groups and attempt to see, with informed hindsight, which thinkers were engaging in philosophy, which is to say the search for wisdom, in the fashions most worthy of attention now.

That Brucker, in his introduction, felt compelled to argue against a broad understanding of the terms philosophy and philosopher points to something quite obvious: the fact that many premodern thinkers considered philosophy to have a much wider range than that assumed by thinkers in Brucker’s era and beyond. If we want to reflect what people in the fifteenth century believed counted as philosophical, then the canon of eligible thinkers requires expansion, and fifteenth-century humanists need to be included.

one of the reasons his book was being reprinted was owing to high demand in Italy: “liber hic non aude tantum in patria nostra, Germania, legeretur, sed etiam ab exteriis, maxime in Italia, frequentiis a viris doctis et bibliopolis expeteretur” (Brucker, “Praefatio secundae editionis,” Historia critica philosophiae a mundi incunabulis ad nostram usque aetatem deducta, 6 vols. [Leipzig, 1766–67], i.n.p.). Brucker became important for the Encyclopédie of Diderot, for which see Paolo Casini, Diderot “philosophe” (Bari, 1962), as well as an important source in Scandinavia: Carl Henrik Koch, Den Danske Filosofis Historie: Dansk oplysningsfilosofi 1700–1800 (Copenhagen, 2003), p. 241. (Thanks to Leo Catana for these last two references.)

The question then becomes, does the canon as we have it now reflect what could legitimately, in the pre-Cartesian era, be considered philosophical? This question is enfolded in a broader, though rarely raised question: should the history of philosophy be told as a story of evolution and progress? Or should it be told in ways that reflect the actors’ categories of analysis, insofar as this is possible to do? Hovering over these questions is the shadow of the history of science. It is worth pausing for a moment to explore what we can loosely call the progressive-externalist debate in the modern historiography of science in order to understand its possible relevance to the history of philosophy. Though currently not a topic of controversy among practicing historians of science, the debate, especially strong in the 1980s, still rears its head in different forms; it is heuristically useful to review its main lines here. The point is not to offer an exhaustive review of recent trends in the history and philosophy of science; rather, my intention is to suggest that certain ways of looking at the history of science are more appropriate to the history of philosophy than to the history of science itself.

As a reaction to the progressive style of historiography advocated in its most exemplary form by George Sarton, an externalist school developed, with key twentieth-century figures being Gaston Bachelard and Thomas Kuhn. Progressivist writers generally held that natural science represented, to use Sarton’s terminology, “systematized positive knowledge.” In Sarton’s view, “the acquisition and systematization of positive knowledge are the only human activities which are truly cumulative and progressive.” Natural science, in this view, progresses with its own internal logic because of demonstrable achievements that can be empirically verified and then used as building blocks for further inquiry. External social, economic,
According to writers who subscribe to an externalist mode of inquiry, it is precisely these latter factors that are important. A primary task of the externalist historian is to reconstruct the “actors’ categories”: the implicit and explicit assumptions and goals of the scientists under study. These assumptions are conditioned, not by an inexorably progressive science standing outside of social circumstances, but rather by just those social, economic, political, and cultural conditions that practitioners of a progressive historiography would deem of little importance. In writing the externalist history of science, its practitioners often try both to be aware of the diverse categories available to the actors under study (relatively uncomplicated, provided one does scholarship well) and to resist retrospectively imposing modern theories, arguments, or even currently accepted facts onto the thinkers one is studying (not so easy since, like it or not, the externalist has his or her own actor’s categories as well).

Each of the above two depictions represents an exaggeration of the practical realities of the history of science; scholars routinely combine the two approaches, perhaps leaning more or less in one of the two directions. Each approach, too, has its advantages and disadvantages when it comes to thinking about natural science. The advantages of a progressive approach include a number of factors. Not least of these are empiricism and a “real-world” adherence by modern-day scientists. If one were to ask a modern, practicing astronomer why Copernicus matters, he or she would not refer to Copernicus’s Pythagoreanism or even to his interest in mathematical manipulation of epicycles in order to save the phenomena. Rather, the first reaction of the modern practicing astronomer would be to highlight Copernicus’s placing the sun at the center of our most immediate planetary system. If one were to ask a modern, practicing physicist interested in mechanics why Galileo is important, his or her first answer would not be that Galileo can be seen as a courtier or even that his discoveries about mechanics were conditioned by his search for employment and patronage. Instead, this modern physicist would say that, on balance, though those external factors might be interesting, Galileo’s real importance lies in the fact that he was able to imagine a world in which, say, no friction existed and a vacuum was possible, with the result that he was able to formulate laws of motion that are still used and verifiable by modern physicists.

The advantages of the progressive approach in the history of natural science may be summed up with a thought experiment. Imagine a person that you love dearly. Now imagine that person is ill with a disease to which a cure has recently been found. Let us say that this cure could not have
existed without the germ theory of disease, a result of the centuries-long development of the discipline of microbiology. This discipline’s roots lie in the work of early modern microscopists, work that over time was refined and theorized in the nineteenth century and the age of Louis Pasteur. Here is the question: would you want this loved one to be treated in the world as we have it now or in, say, the fifteenth century? Most people, in the everyday practice of their lives, would want their loved one to get the best, most up-to-date medical treatment possible. What this means is that in the conduct of their daily lives most people (even externalist historians of science) accept, if only implicitly, an idea of progress in science, something central to the pure progressivist way of thinking.25

The principal advantage of the externalist method is not so much that it helps us better understand the contexts in which an inventor or individual thinker worked, though it does that, too. Instead, the most important feature of the externalist approach, as it has evolved in the last two to three decades, consists in the fact that it has revealed the many levels of reciprocity involved in the creating of scientific knowledge. Patronage, politics, and the nature of intellectual communities have come to the fore as prominent issues. Scholars have argued, for example, that early modern scientists’ search for patronage helped fuel the sorts of problems they investigated, the manner in which they did so, and even the results they achieved. Mario Biagioli’s work on Galileo, stressing Galileo’s social ties to the Medicis rather than his experimental method, has been exemplary in this regard, both in the skill with which he has outlined his position and in the vehemence with which he has been opposed.26

As to intellectual communities, two different aspects have been important: elite sociability and interaction between “high” and “low.” Steven Shapin, for example, in his A Social History of Truth, put an interesting spin on the traditional notion of scientific experimentation.27 A key ingredient

25. Another way to put this argument was voiced centuries ago by David Hume: “Whether your scepticism be as absolute and sincere as you pretend, we shall learn bye and bye, when the company breaks up: We shall then see, whether you go out at the door or the window; and whether you really doubt, if your body has gravity, or can be injured by its fall; according to popular opinion, derived from our fallacious senses and more fallacious experience” (quoted in Jardine and Frasca-Spada, “Splendours and Miseries of the Science Wars,” p. 224).


of the scientific method is the notion of the replicable experiment as an essential vehicle for the acquisition of scientific knowledge. That is, if one produces a certain result with an experiment, the most basic procedure to test the result is to repeat the experiment, under the exact same conditions, to try to falsify it. If the result is repeatedly not falsifiable, the result is provisionally accepted as true. Yet Shapin argues that conditions in the premodern world were not conducive to exact replication (his evidence base is seventeenth-century England, though his deliberate implications are broader). It was not possible, given the technological conditions of the time, to produce exactly standardized instrumentation. Consequently, it was also impossible to have uniform capabilities of measurement that were sufficient to ensure the kind of exactitude necessary for the standard of “falsifiability” to be met in all cases. As a result, standards of scientific “truth” depended as much on the intellectual community to which one belonged as they did on the reported result of an experiment. If one reported the results of an experiment in one of the incipient republic of letters’ scientific journals, one’s social status could contribute as much to whether the reported research would be accepted as true as either the reported results or the described experiment. For Shapin, standards of honor among presumably equal gentlemen were as important as methods in the diffusion and acceptance of scientific conclusions.

However, the principal advantage of the externalist approach to the history of science is that it is translatable to other areas of inquiry within the realm of cultural history, areas that are arguably more appropriate for its application than natural science. Adrian Johns, for example, has taken some of Shapin’s key ideas and employed them in a study of the culture of early modern printing with movable type.28 Again, the temporal focus is seventeenth-century England, and, again, the conclusions can be generalized. Johns poses a formidable proposition: if one opens a book today and sees in the book’s front matter that it is written by a certain author (X) and published by a certain press (Y), one, today, intuitively assumes that those data are true, which is to say that the book was indeed authored by X and published by Y. Yet in the premodern period (which here means before steam-press printing) these assumptions would not have been self-evident in the way that they are today. Forgeries, clandestine publishing, and deliberate editorial misdirection were commonplace occurrences, and copyright laws had yet to be fully elaborated. Again, in any determination of

authenticity (here regarding that of books), social networks would have been prior to the properties seen to inhere in the artifact. Once more, reciprocal trust, in the context of elite, gentlemanly sociability (along with the appropriate standards of conduct) served as a guarantor of authenticity.

Practitioners of the externalist approach have delineated another area of reciprocity, which has to do with spheres of activity traditionally branded high and low and often seen as separate. Pamela Smith and Pamela Long, for instance, show that intimate links existed among artisans, traditionally considered mechanics and thus members of low culture, and the more famous inventors and scientists, traditionally seen as knowledge producers and thus members of high culture.29 The more famous scientists sought out artisans for the artisans’ technical expertise, even as the artisans themselves, from the fifteenth century onward, increasingly partook of the traditionally high realm of written culture.30 Similarly, Deborah Harkness has made a forceful case that in streets, taverns, and workshops, members of Elizabethan London’s artisanal class showed lively curiosity about the natural world, engaging in conversations often parallel to those of better known scholars.31 Behind Francis Bacon’s inquisitiveness, theories, and written expression about natural philosophy lay the intellectual quests of countless early modern Londoners, denizens of a diverse metropolis that in its very nature fostered inquiry.

The point? If gentlemanly sociability was an essential ingredient in allowing the written works of early modern natural philosophers to gain credibility, what often went unrecorded in those works was the contribution of those whose access to written culture was impeded or, better, for whom graphic culture and permanent memorialization were not a key concern. Again, one sees both that many interests in the premodern world were shared by “high” and “low” and that the processes of creating knowledge were reciprocal rather than one-way. Class distinctions, though real, did not necessarily imply completely different spheres of intellectual interests, even though those interests might well have been expressed in different languages and in different registers.

Yet a purely externalist position for the history of the natural sciences implies that there are no absolute scientific truths; as Arnold Davidson has

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argued, following Michel Foucault, there are only “historically specifiable styles of reasoning” into which data can (indeed, inevitably will) be made to fit, according to the social conditions regnant at the time. Davidson offers an interesting example, drawing on the work of Ian Hacking, which is worth quoting in full:

Consider the following statement that you might find in a Renaissance medical textbook: “Mercury salve is good for syphilis because mercury is signed by the planet Mercury which signs the marketplace, where syphilis is contracted.” Hacking argues, correctly I think, that our best description of this statement is not as false or as incommensurable with current medical reasoning, but rather as not even a possible candidate for truth-or-falseness, given our currently accepted styles of reasoning. But a style of reasoning central to the Renaissance, based on the concepts of resemblance and similitude, brings with it the candidacy of such a statement for the status of true or false. Categories of statements get their status as true or false vis-à-vis historically specifiable styles of reasoning.

This type of approach represents the primary reason why the externalist approach to the history of science is ignored by modern, practicing natural scientists. Yet it can be quite useful in other realms of analysis, the “human sciences” and intellectual history included. Davidson, for example, uses this tactic quite brilliantly to understand the beginnings of psychiatry; and there indeed we can see that changes in styles of reasoning would produce different categories of truth and falsity with respect to the study of the human mind. In addition, it can easily be seen how the externalist approach is helpful in gaining a robust understanding of early modern science. Early modern science developed in a time when modern conceptions of experimentation, verification, and, above all, the divisions of science had yet to be categorized.

Despite the many advantages for historians of the externalist approach, it is still possible and, to current practicing natural scientists, not only acceptable and useful but also necessary to conceive of the history of most natural sciences, or natural scientific efforts, in a progressivist fashion. Aerospace engineering, for example, has made easily discernible strides in the last century, and it has done so not because its leaders have conformed to a currently acceptable standard of truth or falsity (though they have

33. Ibid.
done that, too). Instead, that branch of applied mechanics has made what most people would define as progress because of the use of hypotheses drawn from experience and conjecture, which were then tested; the results of those tests, whether successes or failures, become the basis for further work, and so on. For practicing natural scientists, in other words, a progress-oriented narrative of the history of their field is necessary. One can see why there might be reasonable grounds for controversy between devotees of “strong” versions of the progressivist and externalist approaches in the history of science.

The progressivist narrative of philosophy and the consequent creation of its canons began in the eighteenth century. The canons and divisions then established in the history of philosophy can manifestly be shown not to have existed with the same force before then. Their institutional replication owes its real origin to the middle of the nineteenth century and the takeoff of German university culture alluded to above, which saw both the legitimization of a Baconian model of progress and a discourse of objectivity that buttressed that progressivist outlook. But the history of philosophy does not stand in the same relation to philosophy as the history of science stands to science. Philosophy, in short, is not that kind of thing.

We have “better” (as opposed to just different) knowledge than past thinkers when it comes to natural science (whether it is used for good or bad ends is a different question). We do not necessarily have “better” (as opposed to just different) knowledge when it comes to philosophy broadly conceived, which is to say as a field of endeavor that exists primarily to make human life better by pursuing human wisdom. The comparison of the historiography of the natural sciences and the historiography of philosophy is an important one since, oddly enough, their emphases are the contrary of what they should be. Philosophers should be intensely aware of their field’s history, since questions about human happiness, living the right style of life, and so on change according to circumstances but also allow for meaningful transhistorical comparisons at different, though sometimes analogous, moments in time. On the other hand, it is unproblematic that modern planetary scientists do not care all that much about Kepler’s Pythagoreanism (say), provided they have a handle on his laws of planetary motion. For them the former is a curiosity, the latter is a building block; whereas much of what was best about fifteenth-century “philosophy” (emphasizing dialogue, promoting the use of a conversation-stimulating ambiguity, and urging literary formats that foster social cohesion despite the

34. See Daston and Peter Galison, Objectivity (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).
presence of diverse viewpoints) represents an important possible building block for pursuing wisdom today.

One must ask if it is legitimate for anyone conceiving of the history of philosophy now to follow the broad outlines of a progressivist narrative, one that, because of the very problems that it poses as truly philosophical, excludes large chunks of time from its purview. There are other ways of looking at the history of philosophy that are more satisfying, which share some of the externalist sensitivity to context, reciprocity, and social politics. Pierre Hadot has suggested that in the ancient world philosophy represented more its etymological meaning, the “love of wisdom.”\footnote{35} Philosophers were seekers after wisdom, and the highest goal to which one could aspire was living a philosophical life, one that was recognized as such by contemporaries and not necessarily reflected exclusively in written works. Philosophy so considered is not just an ethically neutral tool to sharpen a presumably disembodied mind. It is rather a more amorphous but also more rewarding set of interlocking questions and ideas that aim at moral improvement, the betterment of society, and a political life that reflects moral commitments. It is only in this way that humanist culture of the long fifteenth century (from the era of Petrarch to Pietro Bembo) makes sense philosophically. Indeed, by this standard, this period forms part of a vibrant premodern tradition of writing the history of, and of doing, philosophy that has been written out of the history of philosophy.

\section*{2. Trends in the Long Fifteenth Century}

It is an opportune time to turn to examples of these tendencies in the history of philosophy in the “long fifteenth century.”\footnote{36} These propensities led writers to focus on a thinker’s life as well as his work, on personal exemplarity as well as verbal argumentation, in short, on those who lived a philosophical life rather than on the solution of philosophical problems. To begin, we might focus our attention on one manuscript redaction of a still-unedited treatise, \textit{On Illustrious Men} by the Dominican Giovanni Colonna.\footnote{37} The Florentine manuscript version begins as a treatise entitled

\begin{itemize}
\item This text was known for some time from three major manuscript witnesses: MS Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, 491, hereafter abbreviated B; MS Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, Lat. X 58 (3173), hereafter abbreviated M; and MS Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Barb. Lat. 2351, hereafter abbreviated V. Of these, two (B and V) belong to one family, whereas M is later and represents a different redaction, not carried out under Colonna’s supervision.
\end{itemize}
On the Division and Praise of Philosophy, which runs for about eight folios, followed by an alphabetically ordered series of Lives, which take up approximately one hundred and fifteen folios. The manuscript also includes, in its second half and in a different hand, a version of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De casibus virorum illustrium* (125–203v), which takes up roughly 175 folios. After the Boccaccian treatise, one finds a note of ownership, indicating that the manuscript belonged to Zenobi Guascone (1325–83), a prominent Dominican housed at Santa Maria Novella.

The introduction to the set of lives is noteworthy in a number of respects. Most prominent is the way Colonna brings into relief the idea, supported intuitively by the forms of philosophical life-writing then available, that “moral philosophy must be preferred to natural philosophy.” The argument has a strong Senecan flavor to it, and one cannot help but think of contemporary humanist currents outside the university world, such as Petrarch’s send-up of natural philosophy in his *On His Own Ignorance*. The author’s later condemnation of Cynicism brings to mind a critique of intellectual culture that runs through the humanist movement:

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39. “Quod moralis philosophia preferenda est naturali” (F, f. 1; quoted in “SGS,” p. 209).

philosophers who teach one style of life and live another way are not philosophers at all. They may have the status of professors, and they may teach something that they call philosophy, but in their complacency they cannot truly be called lovers of wisdom. The author’s critique of Stoicism brings to mind the same style of objection launched by Coluccio Salutati, roughly contemporary. The Stoics are to be condemned, our author suggests, because they claim that seemingly self-evident evils, such as physical pain or exile, are not really evils. Their claim is prideful, and it is remote from human experience.

The lives themselves represent a panoply of different thinkers, from ancient to late medieval, secular and Christian, all of whom represented varieties of philosophy and philosophers for this anonymous author. One finds dramatists, poets, the four evangelists, a number of Church fathers, popes from Leo the First to Innocent III, and quite a number of medieval philosophers, including Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh of St. Victor, Lanfranc, Peter Damian, Petrus Alfonsus, Peter Lombard, Peter Comestor, and Thomas Aquinas, to name a few.

The goal, throughout the work, is primarily to find exemplars for salutary ways of life rather than doctrines. Explicit discussions of a philosopher’s work and thought come up only insofar as these matters impinge on his life. The term philosopher is used broadly, to mean, primarily, someone who simply sought wisdom in all realms of life. Once (and only once, so it seems) it is used as a kind of code to represent a non-Christian, when the author, in his Life of ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite, writes that “Dionysius the Areopagite, turned from a philosopher into a Christian, was baptized by the Apostle Paul.”


42. “Contra philosophos Stoicos qui contendunt mala, scilicet dolores mutilationis, exilia, et ceteras erumnas non esse mala” (F, f. 7v; quoted in “SGS,” p. 225). For Salutati, see Coluccio Salutati, Epistolario, 4 vols. in 5, vols. 15–18 of Fonti per la storia d’Italia, ed. Francesco Novati (Rome, 1891–1911), 4.2.305–6, where since even Christ is said to have cried, the Stoics’ impassivity is seen as unrealistic. Similarly Colonna sees the Stoics’ position as evidence of pride.


44. “Dyonisius arriopagita ex philosopho christianus effectus, a Paulo apostolo baptizatus est” (F, f. 40v). This rare usage, counterposing philosophy as a signal of non-Christian styles of thought to Christian ways of thinking, can be compared to a similarly rare usage by Ficino. In his Platonic Theology, immediately before the conclusion of the entire work, Ficino spoke of the “way of conjecture” as coterminous with the “way of the philosophers,” both of which he sets against the “more venerable guides among Christians” (Marsilio Ficino, Platonic Theology,
It is a truism to state (but it is no less noteworthy in this text as elsewhere in premodern discussions of the history of philosophy) what to us is a primary, inseparable component of history—precise dating—is not a primary concern. The author, at the end of most of the individual biographies, tells when the figure in question flourished, usually by locating him in the reign of an important ruler. The chronology was of secondary importance; often the “point of flourishing” of the thinkers under consideration (represented by the Latin word clariuit) is left out entirely, and occasionally the temporal designation is left blank. The dating was something that could be left to the end, to be filled in only if it was possible to find it easily. Systematically organizing systematically coherent thought was not the point; finding respectable exemplars toward the end of leading a life in search of wisdom was.

Moving into fifteenth-century Florence, we see that this concern for uniting the life and work of philosophers continued. Two works by Leonardo Bruni—“An Isagogue to Moral Philosophy” and “The Life of Aristotle”—reflect these notions in an exemplary manner. Bruni, who held important offices in the papal court as well as served a lengthy stint as chancellor of the city of Florence, was an immensely popular humanist writer, by some accounts the fifteenth century’s best-selling author.
work encompassed translations, letters, philosophical dialogues, biographies, histories, and essays. Bruni begins his Latin *Isagogicon* (a title whose Greek meaning, “introduction,” indicates his intentions) with an argument that turns up repeatedly in fifteenth-century discussion: authentic philosophy helps to relieve the purposelessness of life. “As it is,” Bruni writes, “we generally make the mistake of living without a defined purpose, as though we were wandering about in the dark like blind men on whatever by-way chance should offer us, instead of traveling safely and confidently along the beaten track” (“IMP,” p. 267). Blindness and aimlessness: these dangers will continue to serve as the metaphorical bases of fifteenth-century critique of institutionalized learning and of self-identified though inauthentic philosophers who, as Angelo Poliziano later put it in his *Lamia*, pop out their eyeballs when they enter their own homes, possessing sight only when they are out in public, watching and judging other people.49

Bruni continues immediately thereafter in “An Isagogue to Moral Philosophy” to make a point similar to that found in the earlier, humbler anonymous treatise just under discussion: that moral philosophy is the most useful type of philosophy. Moral philosophy is “entirely concerned with our own affairs, so that those who neglect it and devote themselves to physics would seem, in a sense, to be minding somebody else’s business and neglecting their own.” Finally, in the introductory part of his dialogue, Bruni sounds another theme that forms part of the long fifteenth century’s focus: he writes that moral philosophy helps us “cease to live at random” (“IMP,” p. 268). Moral philosophy affords human beings direction in a world that is potentially directionless.

To digress briefly, when Bruni and other thinkers make these sorts of statements about moral philosophy and its superiority, they are voicing an opinion that is characteristic of certain ancient views of philosophy. True, the classic ancient division of philosophy, articulated by the Stoics but more or less present in many ancient philosophers, was threefold, comprising ethics, natural philosophy (that is, *physike*, the study of *physis* or nature), and logic. Still, the three complementary branches were seen as benefitting human life, even as those three fields enfolded elements much

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broader than what those names seem to imply now. They were not academic disciplines, the way that term is often currently construed. Though natural philosophy is often studied today as a predecessor of natural science (which in one respect, that of acute observation of the natural world, it surely was), the ancient version also included metaphysics, not to mention theology and the study of the human soul. When, to take one example, Seneca offers detailed natural philosophical knowledge, he is most often making a point about human life, impressively detailed as his natural philosophical observations can be. This focus on humanity helps explain Seneca’s preface to the first book of his Natural Questions, where, while lauding the study of natural philosophy and its accompanying insights into the divine, he makes one thing clear: natural philosophy’s ultimate advantage is that it allows human beings to understand their place in the world in relation to the divine, itself manifested in the complex workings of the natural world. Seneca tells Lucilius: “I am . . . grateful to nature, not just when I view it in that aspect which is obvious to everybody but when I have penetrated its mysteries; when I learn what the stuff of the universe is, who its author or custodian is, what god is.” The point of natural philosophical investigation, as one sees repeatedly in the Natural Questions, was not to find out how nature worked outside of, or separate from, human concerns (a staple, needless to say, of modern views of what natural science does). Instead, natural philosophy designated what its name implied; it indicated one important aspect of philosophy, the search for human wisdom. The enterprise of natural philosophy reflected, back to human beings, what existed in nature, and in so doing it enlarged and broadened human experience. It was secondarily about the outside world. It was primarily about human beings.

50. For one iteration of this formulation, see Michael Trapp, Philosophy in the Roman Empire: Ethics, Politics, and Society (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 1–27.


52. Classification of philosophy and of the sciences (epistēmēi) represent complex problems, reaching back to the ps.-Platonic Epinomis and to Aristotle, who resolved the dilemma of an unwieldy plurality of possible divisions (merē) of philosophy (which would amount to as many as there are substances, each of which would need its own corresponding division of philosophy) by positing the need for hierarchy among the branches and a consequent “first” philosophy, that is, metaphysics (compare Metaph. 4.2.1004a); he divided the branches of knowledge into speculative (theoretikē, in which were included metaphysics, physics, and psychology, among others), practical (praktikē: ethics and politics), and productive (poētikē: rhetoric and poetics); for two statements, see Phys. 192b8–12 and Metaph. 6.1, 1025b–1026a. See also Leonardo Tarán, Academica: Plato, Philip of Opus, and the pseudo-Platonic Epinomis (Philadelphia, 1975), Jacques Mariétan, Problème de la classification des sciences.
Thus it is unsurprising when Bruni goes on to suggest that a key concern of philosophy is the proper end of humankind; most agree that “happiness” or “flourishing,” the Greek *eudaimonia*, is the ultimate end. He then outlines what he considers the three major schools of thought: the Epicurean, Peripatetic, and Stoic. Here, too, Bruni’s text reflects something alive in premodern discussions of the history of philosophy. After Bruni’s resume of the three philosophical schools is complete, his interlocutor in the work confesses a difficulty: all of the doctrines seemed to have something to recommend them. All are appealing. Bruni responds, “although there are three sects of philosophers, all of them seem to say the same things, or nearly so, at least about the highest good. Hence, you need not be afraid that in following one school you will depart very much from the others.” His interlocutor says in turn, “I’m very grateful indeed that I have heard what I might call your ‘reconciliation of the philosophers’” (“IMP,” p. 273).

Bruni partakes of an ancient tradition that came into its own again during the fifteenth century. This tradition was solidified in late antiquity and later proved important for Ficino. It reflected a late ancient propensity to seek harmony in philosophy or what late ancient commentators termed *symphonia*. Truth was one, and though members of ancient schools might differ, if the philosopher read them correctly, their essential harmony would emerge. It was a bad philosopher who could not see beyond surface or incidental disagreements to the internal core of truth. Since works of different authors and, sometimes, even works of the same author seemed contradictory, the primary task of the authentic seeker of wisdom was interpretation: bringing the truth, sometimes obscure, from darkness into light by careful reading and creative imitation.

Today, Plato and Aristotle and, more so, Platonism and Aristotelianism can be and often are read as reflecting different systems of thought. Most late ancient thinkers did not see it this way.53 Olympiodorus, for example, says in his *Commentary on Plato’s Gorgias* that “concerning Aristotle we must point out that in the first place he in no way disagrees with Plato, T. H. Brookes, *Plato’s Gorgias* (Oxford, 1998); and James A. Weisheipl, “Classification of the Sciences in Medieval Thought,” *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965): 54–90. My contention is not that the division solidified in the Hellenistic period (ethikê, physikê, logikê) was the only one; rather, even in the case of natural philosophy, ancient thinkers posited the need for a human subject. This human-centered view was the case even for Aristotle; the *phainomena*, “appearances,” are appearances as they seem to us, who are presumed to have relatively reliable powers of sensory apprehension. 53. See Lloyd P. Gerson, “What Is Platonism?” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43 (July 2005): 253–76 and Aristotle and Other Platonists (Ithaca, N.Y., 2005). The tendency reached back to middle Platonism; see John Dillon, *The Middle Platonist: 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (London, 1996), pp. 52–106 on Antiochus of Ascalon.
except in appearance. In the second place, even if he does disagree, that is because he benefited from Plato.”54 In both cases, it was necessary to use both thinkers to arrive at a complete version of the truth. Simplicius, in his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics*, says that Plato and Aristotle may differ as to the *onoma* (the “name” or surface meaning) but that they agreed when it came to *pragma* (“the matter,” that is, the underlying message).55 Employing these and other examples, Lloyd Gerson has argued that, in the minds of most late ancient interpreters, discrepancies between the two philosophers reflected the fact that, since philosophy encompassed so many facets of human experience, it was necessary that there be a division of labor. Both Plato and Aristotle were necessary if true wisdom were to be achieved. In the typical premodern exegetical way of doing philosophy, the philosopher’s task was to bring out the essential truth of the ancient source’s message, a truth to which the ancient thinker himself might not even have been fully privy.

To return to Bruni, his *Life of Aristotle* reflects this perspective when Plato comes up for discussion. Like any biographer of Aristotle, Bruni needed to comment on Aristotle’s relationship with his famous teacher and on the fact that they did not agree on everything. Bruni writes: “When Plato was still alive, Aristotle had already begun to disagree with him about many things, and even then, it is plain, there were those who followed Aristotle.” Bruni goes on: “It is not, however, to be thought that there was any dissension or disagreement between the philosophers in their general tendency. The Old Academy and the Peripatetics, who both derive their teaching from Plato and Socrates, seem to have the same doctrine, and to hold the same views about virtue and conduct, good and evil, the nature of the universe, and the immortality of the soul.”56 For Bruni there was no war between rival systems. Instead, one needed to be sagacious enough to perceive that the two thinkers reflected the same truth, the only possible truth, on important matters.

Less important matters were another kettle of fish. Bruni writes: “in small details and in matters of middling importance it is clear that there were sometimes disagreements and opposition.” He goes on to present some of the usual critiques of Plato: his views on communal marriage, communal property, and the ambiguity inherent in the Socratic style. Yet this latter aspect, ambiguity, serves to highlight Bruni’s implicit acceptance of the “division of labor” type of argument advanced by late ancient think-

55. Quoted in ibid., p. 259 n. 25.
ers. Plato’s works are “more suitable for men who are already ripe and finished scholars; tender wits will not be able to find sufficient instruction in them.” Bruni, ever more conscious in those years (he wrote the *Life* in the late 1420s) of the importance of literature, philosophy, and history in educating Florence’s elite citizenry, realized that Aristotle, unlike Plato, was more teachable. Aristotle’s teaching was interconnected across discrete subject matters and as such was more synthetic: “His explication of these subjects was very careful and serious, so that, whether he was teaching logic, natural science, or ethics, his teaching was perfectly connected; and the body of knowledge was developed from the first elements to the very end.” Aristotle, in short, “wished to instruct the young, nourish those of middle ability, and give exercise and polish to the mature.”

Plato, on the other hand, was suitable only for a select few: the elites who were not only likely to read philosophy but who were also mature enough to tackle the difficult task of exegesis that Plato presented, ambiguous as he could often seem. Neither philosopher was systematically better, and each had his place in the larger social economy within which philosophy was learned and practiced.

Turning to the environment immediately after Bruni’s early efforts, one observes the occurrence of a signal event: the translation into Latin of Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of the Philosophers* by the Camaldolese friar Ambrogio Traversari in the early 1430s. Laertius’s treatment of Aristotle is noteworthy. One of the first things one learns about Aristotle is that he was Plato’s “most genuine disciple” (gnēsiotatos tôn Platonos mathēton). Immediately thereafter one is made aware that Aristotle diverged from Plato while Plato was still alive, eventually forming a new school. Laertius does not suggest that Aristotle did so for theoretical reasons. Instead, he was absent as an Athenian envoy to Philip of Macedon. Upon returning to find Xenocrates at the academy’s head, Aristotle believed he could do better, and the lyceum was born. In other words, Aristotle did not begin with a systematic theory, in which he differed from a systematic Platonism. He had a different temperament, was interested perhaps in different questions and methods, and sought to individuate himself from the tradition in which he had been formed; it was personal first, theoretical second.

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57. Ibid., pp. 288, 289.
type of approach would have been intuitively and immediately familiar to Laertius’s fifteenth-century readers, living like the ancients they revered in a face-to-face, premodern society.

The end of Laertius’s account of Aristotle’s life is revealing as well. After offering a catalogue of Aristotle’s works, he presents the division of philosophy into theoretical and practical, moving on (again, significantly, only at the end) to a brief inventory of Aristotle’s philosophical positions. Nowhere in this list does Laertius say there was a difference between Plato and Aristotle. A reader could infer differences, for differences there were. Still, one is struck by the commonalities. Love, for example, exists not just for “intercourse” (synousia) but also for philosophia. Laertius explains: “Like Plato, [Aristotle] held that God was incorporeal; that his providence extended to the heavenly bodies, that he is unmoved, and that earthly events are regulated by their affinity with them (the heavenly bodies).”

Listing positions, discussing individual character traits that served as positive or negative exemplars for the good life: these were important. Delineating internally coherent but discretely different systems of thought was not.

If we move to the 1450s, two treatments of schools of philosophers come to the fore. Both are short, both are in the form of letters written in response to a request for further information, we are told, after a conversation between friends occasioned the desire to put information in writing, and both have been dated specifically to 1458. These two short treatises reflect the state of play in Florentine discussions about the history of philosophy in the 1450s, and they offer early views into the mindsets of two different thinkers who would make their mark decisively on the city’s history, albeit in very different ways: Bartolomeo Scala and Ficino.

Scala, like a number of Tuscan humanists, came from outside the city proper and studied law in Florence. The year 1465 saw his appointment to the same position Salutati and Bruni had held in such distinguished fashions, chancellor of Florence. During his tenure in public life he continued to write; dialogues, fables, and history were all included in his oeuvre, even as he continued the life of an active civil servant. His 1458 Letter on the Sects of the Philosophers (Epistola de sectis philosophorum) signaled an early tendency to think about philosophy and its application to everyday life, and it presents its leitmotif early on. Near the beginning, after telling his addressee (Filippo Borromeo) that he will treat in this brief letter the sects of

61. Ibid., 1:5.1.31–32, p. 479.
philosophers that are rather well known, he writes: “For they seem so similar and so tied together that, even to someone who is reflecting deeply about the matter, the way in which they differ most is not easily apparent.”63 He recognizes immediately what he calls the “conciliatio” that Bruni had effected in “An Isagogue to Moral Philosophy” (“E,” p. 251).64 All ancient philosophers were united, he writes, in seeking the highest good.

Scala describes Plato’s academy and Aristotle’s lyceum, and he says that it is from this point on, after the division of pupils into the academy and the lyceum, that “you have the beginning of the sects, and even a kind of dissension among philosophers, although they differed among themselves in name alone, since they were pursuing the same principles and the same source of things” (“E,” p. 253).65 It is an error, according to Scala, to think that the Old Academy differed to such an extent from the Peripatetics that members of the Old Academy subscribed to what Scala defines as the Socratic practice of bringing everything into doubt. “Indeed,” Scala continues, “there was no difference between the Peripatetics and the Old Academy. . . . For there was the highest degree of harmony [summa convenientia] between them” (“E,” p. 253).66 Even if it seems that Aristotle differed from his teacher Plato on ideas and other matters, Augustine in his Contra academicos (3.19) says that “to one interpreting most carefully and clear-sightedly it will appear that there was no division [discrimen] between these two philosophers” (“E,” pp. 253–54).67 The message is clear: on fundamental points the two fountainheads of ancient philosophy agreed.

Passing to Ficino and his early letter “On the Four Sects of the Philosophers,” one sees that, in the same year, the young Ficino makes more


64. “Nam et Leonardus Aretinus, vir sane doctus et elegans, in libello quem appellavit Graeco vocabulo Isagogicon, conciliafitionem quandam fecit philosophorum atque illorum maxime quorum putatur sententia praestantior.”

65. “En habes initium sectarum et quasi philosophorum quandam seditionem, quamquam solo inter se nomine differentes, eadem principia, eundem rerum fontem sectabantur” (punctuation slightly altered).

66. “Nihil enim inter Peripateticos et illam veterem Academiam differebat. . . . Fuit enim inter eos rerum summa convenientia.”

67. “Nam etsi videtur Aristoteles et ideas primus labefactasse et multis alis in locis a magistro Plato dissensisse, dicit tamen divus Augustinus tertio Contra Academicos libro diligentissime atque acutissime interpretanti nullum fuisset inter hos duos philosophos discrimen apparevere.”
distinctions and seeks more precision of argumentation. He delineates four schools of philosophers: Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, and Epicureans. Ficino sees a difference between the positions of Plato and Aristotle. They agree on God as the first cause, but Aristotle in contrast to Plato “thinks that the world has existed and will exist perpetually.”

Another obvious difference:

Aristotle thinks that man’s soul is a certain simple, rational, and incorporeal nature, which perfects and moves the body to which it is joined. But whether soul is immortal or resistant to death, he did not sufficiently say. And so, some Peripatetics think that Aristotle meant that a soul of this sort was eternal and divine. But others, and not a smaller number, perhaps, interpret their teacher in this way: they argue that Aristotle thought the soul would die along with the body.

The shift here is noteworthy; it is not Aristotle necessarily but rather the Peripatetics who (perhaps even, as Ficino argues, for the most part) believe that Aristotle meant that the soul would die along with the body. Of the four schools of philosophy it is significant, parenthetically, that Ficino gives the most space to the Epicureans, evidence perhaps of Ficino’s early Lucretian period. Ficino is fascinated by the notion that for the Epicureans a god existed, but one who took no thought for his creation; the god of Lucretius, according to Ficino, “is eternal, wisest, and most blessed; it does nothing, has no duty, and cares for nothing.” Ficino passes no judgment here, neither praising nor condemning this notion at this early period in his career.

It was a time of sorting out, mostly from Latin sources, ancient opinions


69. Ibid.: Animum hominis esse naturam quandam simplicem, rationalem atque incorpoream, corpus illud cui iuncta sit perficientem atque moventem. Immortalis verone sit an morti obnoxius animus, non satis expressit. Ideoque Peripateticorum alii volunt Aristotelem eiummodi animum eternum divinuxque posuisse. Alii vero nec forte pauciores ita preceptorem suum interpretantur, ut ostendant illum putavisse animum una cun corpore defecturum.


on matters of philosophical moment. Contemporary to this work Ficino wrote a short treatise on the moral virtues and a lengthy vernacular epistolary treatise on the opinions of the ancients about God and the soul. He was confronting the weight of the ancient pagan notion that there existed, indeed, one supreme being. Still, Ficino had yet to reconcile this idea with the Christian notion of a supreme being who is also a personal god, interested in individual human beings. His short treatise on the sects of the philosophers represents a small part of an early process of gathering and synthesis that would lead to his masterpiece, the *Platonic Theology*, begun some ten years later, published in 1482, and reconciling the late ancient Platonic propensity for hierarchy with the Christian conception of a personal and providential deity.

The *Platonic Theology* presents Ficino’s most thorough articulation of a variety of philosophy that sought, as many scholars have argued (recently Michael Allen and Sebastiano Gentile), to be comprehensive. In Ficino’s view this variety of the search for wisdom was only accessible to a few: the *ingeniosi* (or “acute wits” in Allen’s felicitous formulation). Or, in line with the manner that Gentile has recently outlined the commonality of vision between George Gemistos Plethon and Ficino, there existed a conviction that beyond everyday common religion there was “a higher religion, identified with philosophy, reserved to a select few.” Those few elect needed to be able to bring out the essentially unified message present in all philosophy. Ficino’s *Platonic Theology* allows this tendency often to come to the fore. As numerous examples indicate, Ficino states, implies, or hints that Aristotle and Plato were of the same mind on the issues of most moment.

Book six of the *Platonic Theology* is embedded in a larger section of the work that contains a variety of proofs of the immortality of the human soul. The beginning of the book presents Ficino’s recollection of conversations he had at the house of Giovanni Cavalcanti. Cavalcanti summarizes five general opinions on the soul, only the last of which is correct. His language is revealing when he discusses the “final alternative,” which is

73. There are useful studies along these lines in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (Oxford, 1999), and *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, ed. Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen (Cambridge, 2010).
that “man’s soul is something divine, that is, something indivisible, wholly present to every part of the body and produced by an incorporeal creator such that it depends only on the power of that agent” and not on matter (PT, 3:6.1.7, p. 125). “The ancient theologians teach us this: Zoroaster, Mercury, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, and Plato, whose footsteps Aristotle, the natural philosopher, for the most part follows” (“quorum vestigia sequitur plurimum physicus Aristoteles”) (PT, 3:6.1.7, pp. 125–26). Here two things are apparent: Aristotle is perceived as being for the most part in harmony with the right position on the soul; second, and in line with Gerson’s notion that late ancient philosophers saw Plato and Aristotle as in agreement but as sharing philosophy’s work, Aristotle is tagged simply as physicus, natural philosopher. It was not that Plato and Aristotle were thinking along different synthetic or systematic lines; rather, the project of philosophy was so large that a division of labor was necessary.

Immediately thereafter Ficino begins to offer proofs for the right view regarding the soul. This chapter presents many of the attitudes and stances that Michael Allen has identified as characteristic of Ficino’s outlook. First, there is a concern for pedagogy and the possibly damaging effects an unreflective style of education can have on the minds of students. The common philosophers (plebei philosophi) who have adopted any of the earlier incorrect views have done so because of “long usage and custom” (PT, 3:6.2.1, p. 127). Schooled by ignorant tutors from the time of our youth that everything is corporeal, we fall into error about the nature of the soul. The senses are often wrong, and we are deceived:

Just as a child who is born blind finds it difficult to believe in the existence of a variety of colors and of light, . . . so likewise a rational soul surrounded until now by body’s darkness can scarcely be brought to accept that an incorporeal light exists. . . . Plato laments this at length in the seventh book of the Republic; and Aristotle confirms the point in the second book of the Metaphysics, when he says that the human intellect, when confronted with the things which are in themselves most manifest in the whole universal order, blinks like an owl’s eye turned to the light of the sun. [PT, 3:6.2.9, p. 137]

Other examples of Ficino arguing for a concord between Plato and Aristotle abound. For example, he cites Aristotle as agreeing with Plato on the infusion of the intellect into the newly born human being (see PT, 3:10.7.4, p. 177, and Aristotle, De generatione animalium, 2.3.736a). Later,
Ficino’s intention is to refute Averroes’s doctrine on the soul (see PT, 5:15, pp. 2–227). The Cordovan Muslim, Ibn Rushd (1126–98), known to the Latin West as Averroes, had authored a series of influential commentaries on Aristotle, which accompanied Aristotle’s works as they were translated, sometimes from Greek originals, sometimes from Arabic intermediaries, into Latin in the thirteenth century.77 Averroes’s influence was considerable; he set the agenda for medieval debate when it came to the thorny question of solving the many problems that Aristotle’s texts presented. One of the most prominent concerned Aristotle’s On the Soul and whether, more specifically, Aristotle had maintained that the human soul was mortal or immortal. Aristotle’s formulations in his On the Soul were ambiguous; and Averroes’s interpretation could itself be understood, as it was by many in the late thirteenth century and beyond, to advocate (roughly speaking) the notion that, after death, the individual human soul was subsumed into a larger entity, losing its specific differentiation in the process. In short, the danger with which Averroes became associated, to Christians, was that of heresy, for to deny the immortality of the substantially individual human soul meant negating the possibility of rewards and punishments after death.78

Ficino begins his treatment by exculpating Aristotle for Averroes’s flaws; Averroes did not know Greek, and he read Aristotle’s works after they had been translated into Arabic. “So it is not surprising if, on certain particularly difficult matters, the intent of that most succinct of authors should have eluded him” (PT, 3:6.2.1, p. 9). The best interpreters, in whose number Ficino includes Gemistos Plethon, Proclus, and Themistius, believed that both Platonists and Aristotelians held the soul to be immortal. Ficino says he will use all his resources “to reject Averroes and to prove the interpretation of Avicenna and Algazel, or rather the [original] view of Plato and Aristotle” (PT, 5:15.2.2, p. 29, something Ficino intones again at 5:15.14.3, pp. 162–63). Ficino, as is apparent, is perfectly ready to accept certain Islamic thinkers into his interpretive armamentarium, here Avi-


cenna (Ibn-Sina) and Al-Ghazali. Ficino’s goal is to draw the truth out of Aristotle, a truth on which many interpreters touched correctly, in his view, even as some made the mistake of thinking that the Stagirite could have fallen into such grievous error concerning the human soul.

One can go so far as to say that, in the Platonic Theology, Aristotle in Ficino’s view is never incorrect. Self-identified Aristotelians or Peripatetics may be wrong, but not Aristotle himself.

Beyond these concord-oriented examples there are other passages in the Platonic Theology that show that Ficino’s conception of philosophy had more to do with a style of life integrating contemplation and ritual practices than with pure rational argument alone. For instance, he hoped to show that the human mind is formed by the divine mind. He lays the groundwork for practices of spiritual ascent by recording how broad philosophy was among the prisci theologi. Ficino writes:

The philosophy of Zoroaster (as Plato testifies) was nothing other than wise piety and divine worship. The disputations of Mercury Trismegistus too all begin with prayers and end with sacrifices. The philosophy of Orpheus and Aglaophemus is also entirely concerned with praise of the divine. Pythagoras used to start his studies of philosophy with the morning singing of sacred hymns. Not only in speaking but in thinking too Plato taught us in every single matter to begin with God; and he himself always began with God. [PT, 4:12.1.14, p. 25]

Another example regarding Ficino’s broad view of philosophy occurs when he records various practices of “dormition” or alienation from the physical body as exemplary among many ancient figures. For example, Ficino, while discussing “signs” of the soul’s immortality, offers instances of the soul’s power over bodily phenomena: “They say that for fifty years Epimenides of Crete slept, that is, in my opinion, he lived separated from his senses. Similarly Pythagoras, they say, lay hidden away for ten years, and Zoroaster for twenty. Socrates, Plato writes, stood motionless in the same spot from one sunrise to another without closing his eyes and with his face and gaze directed toward the same place, deep in thought and abstracted from his body” (PT, 4:13.2.2, p. 121).

Plato did things like this, as did Xenocrates (one hour a day) and others. Ficino’s concern for practice as well as theory reveals a fact about philosophy that remained an important part of philosophy until at least the eighteenth century: philosophy was about living an exemplary life, a vita philosophica, as much as it was about coming up with systematic theories or verbally coherent argumentation.
Much more Renaissance evidence could be cited to buttress this view. To take one telling example, Giovanni Antonio Flaminio (a pupil of the Bolognese humanist Filippo Beroaldo) wrote a treatise entitled *On the Origin of Philosophy and the Philosophical Sects*, published in 1524. There, the tendency to focus on the lives of the philosophers is so pronounced that Flaminio often passes over their writings and doctrines. His statement toward the end of his *Life of Aristotle* (which is heavily indebted to Bruni) is typical. Having detailed the events of Aristotle’s life, as well as his witty sayings, Flaminio writes: “A list of his writings would take too long. So I pass them over intentionally.”

Flaminio’s treatise is revealing for another reason. Though he includes stock phrases delineating the different branches of philosophy, the overall import of the treatise is clear: real philosophy, in his day and age, is moral philosophy. When he surveys the five branches of philosophy (in his view, ethics, logic, mathematics, physics, and metaphysics), ethics receives the lengthiest treatment. This choice on his part points to the fact that the structure of this miniature history of philosophy, like almost all such treatments from the long premodern period, focuses the reader’s attention first on the character of the philosophers under study and only secondarily on their doctrinal arguments.

Needless to say, one would not want to exaggerate and suggest that there was little concern for argumentation in the long history of premodern philosophy. On the contrary, from Aristotle onward, there has been a demonstrable concern among philosophers for isolating arguments, discussing predecessors’ views, and doing the kinds of things that have come to be thought of, in the post-Kantian era, as the basic fabric of philosophy. Aristotle’s discussion of his predecessors’ views on Being, early in his *Metaphysics* (1.983a–984b), stands as an exemplar of this sort of approach. Enfolded in a discussion of the four causes (material, formal, efficient, and final), the account relates the opinions of those thinkers who, according to Aristotle, considered the cause of all things to be material and to consist in one primary element. Thales believed water to be the main principle of all things, Anaximenes and Diogenes of Apollonia air, Heraclitus fire, and so on. Aristotle discusses these and other opinions, including Plato’s theory of forms (1.984b–988a), offers substantial critiques of his predecessors’ opinions (1.988b–993a), and moves to his own discussion, which foregrounds the need to think about causality in ways that go beyond purely

80. See ibid., f. 20v.
physical substances—to think metaphysically, to use the term that those
who organized Aristotle’s works after his death employed when they ar-
ranged them in a sequence, edited the individual texts, and made them
public.\textsuperscript{81} Aristotle’s examination of his predecessors’ opinions, in other
words, gave him a foundation on which he could, having found those
opinions inadequate, begin to build his own argument.

Many other examples could be cited, from Aristotle on, that show a
continuous concern among philosophers for isolating arguments with
precise attention to verbal formulations.\textsuperscript{82} But that is not the story that
is lacking from the modern historiography of philosophy. Instead, the
missing story represents a long-lived part of what it meant to be a
philosopher, wherein exemplary conduct and the search for a style of
life leading to human flourishing represented philosophy’s pinnacle
and ultimate object, the final vessel into which all other philosophical
subspecialties flowed.

The demotion of moral philosophy to a secondary rank among philo-
sophical subjects took place in the same period in which the demotion of
political philosophy occurred: the late eighteenth and early nineteenth
centuries. Recent scholarship has made a forceful case that even someone
so strongly identified with philosophy’s epistemological turn as Descartes
considered mathematics as a kind of personal spiritual exercise.\textsuperscript{83} It was
only in the era of Brucker that the history of philosophy began to be orga-
nized with a deliberate view to epistemology and metaphysics divorced
from religious or personal concerns. This organization of the history of
philosophy represents a mirror image of the model of schools or sects.
Philosophy’s image became one of a discipline that stood above individual
lives (insofar as each sect or school had its founder) instead of being some-
thing that was about exemplary lives. This move allowed philosophy to be
conceptualized as a discipline not tied to this or that person, but instead as
engaging, progressively, in the search for permanent answers to questions

\textsuperscript{81} See Jonathan Barnes, “Roman Aristotle,” in \textit{Philosophia Togata II}, ed. Barnes and M.
Griffin (Oxford, 1997), pp. 1–69, for an exposition of all available evidence, with abundant
bibliography.

\textsuperscript{82} For a recent example of writing the history of ancient philosophy with attention
primarily to argument (rather than context and style of life), see John M. Cooper, \textit{Pursuits of
Cooper’s position is that in the ancient world, way of life was indeed an important
philosophical marker, as Hadot had emphasized, but that Hadot’s error came in not realizing
that for ancient philosophers their way of life was predicated on a commitment to reason; this
is to say that, in Cooper’s view, a philosopher’s way of life came into being only as a result of
the types of argumentation and analysis in which he engaged.

\textsuperscript{83} See Matthew L. Jones, \textit{The Good Life in the Scientific Revolution: Descartes, Pascal,
of universal import that were and would be valid for all human beings, for all time. Valuable as this natural science model is, when it comes to the historiography of philosophy, it has obscured many of the interests shared by “canonical” philosophers, and it has allowed certain epochs, Italy’s long fifteenth century among them, to be almost entirely skipped.