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Invited Session

Reframing the Historiography of Philosophy: A Dialectic Approach

Chair: Marcelo Dascal (Tel Aviv); Co-Chair: Tomás Calvo Martínez (Madrid)

The guiding idea of this Invited Session is an approach to the history of philosophy that considers as central, rather than marginal, the fact that philosophical ideas evolve and influence their environment through a process of confrontation with opposed or competing ideas. In his recent work on the Enlightenment, Jonathan Israel has demonstrated the role of the intense debate around radically new philosophical ideas in creating the conceptual underpinnings of revolution and of a new social order. Randall Collins, from another perspective, has highlighted the role of debate in the rise and fall of philosophical schools. Both Israel and Collins have thus shown that, without a decidedly ‘dialectical’ approach to intellectual history, its understanding and influence can hardly be grasped. Though analyzing in detail some particular philosophical contests, they have focused their attention mainly on the macro-level of relatively long term intellectual conflicts and their effects.

We believe that the acknowledgment of the importance of controversy should be significantly extended, by viewing it as fundamental also for the appropriate interpretation of a specific philosophical theory or even of a text. For philosophical ideas – and not only them – arise, take shape, are modified and enriched, establish and entrench themselves, and eventually are toppled in the arena of debate with their contemporary competitors. Western historiography of philosophy has usually disregarded the actual controversies in which philosophers are engaged; they are usually considered either as personal, political or otherwise philosophically irrelevant episodes, or as at best marginal, accidental occurrences. We think in so doing historians of philosophy and of ideas miss the fundamental point that only by taking into account the position(s) to which a philosophical theory is actually opposed (i.e., against which it argues and which it tries to overcome) one can properly understand that theory and its deep rationale and significance.

The ‘dialectical reframing’ of the history of philosophy that this Invited Session is devoted to owes much to the various meanings philosophers have endowed the term ‘dialectics’ with. Yet, it is an innovative approach, quite different from Plato’s, Aristotle’s, Renaissance, Leibniz’s, Kant’s, Hegel’s and Marx’s ‘dialectics’. It views the activity of debate as the engine of intellectual – hence, of social and cultural – evolution, and pays it due tribute by investigating the occurrence, modalities, mechanisms, and effects of this activity in the evolution of philosophy. It is in fact unexplainable why this has been so overlooked so far. Whatever its reasons, the time is ripe now to amend the failure and to develop the new, debate-sensitive approach the history of philosophy – and not only it – has been craving for.

Participants: Tomas Calvo Martinez (Madrid), Han-liang Chang (Taipei), Marcelo Dascal (Tel Aviv), Ofer Gal (Sidney), Jonathan Israel (Princeton), Anna Carolina Regner (Porto Alegre), Yaron Senderowicz (Tel Aviv).