A Suggested Reform in the Syllabuses of Philology and Philosophy

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Abstract:

As happened in the conflict between von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and Nietzsche, even today there are philologists who do not believe that philosophy is a respectable science. One of them is Tom Shippey, a scholar of English and Germanic philology. In this paper I want to argue two things: 1) that in the golden age of philology, the major philologists were directly influenced by the philosophers; 2) that in a reform of the faculty of Arts and Humanities it would be possible to improve the syllabus of Philology linking it to philosophical texts, and to improve the syllabus of Philosophy by immersing it in the history of philosophy and its texts.

Keywords: von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Nietzsche, Tom Shippey, philosophy, philology, Latin Medieval texts.

An Allegation

Is it true that comparative philology is both at odds with philosophy and is scientifically superior to it? This question could sound weird, irrelevant and forgettable to most, like if someone asked: do archangels go on strike more frequently than cherubim?

However, the debate did exist, as Sheldon Pollock, a renowned scholar of Sanskrit, reminds us:

> In 1872 a now-obscure pamphlet was published by a young – and, for non-classicists, now equally obscure – philologist. The philologist was Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, and the pamphlet was *Zukunftsphilologie!* (Future Philology!), an attack on Friedrich Nietzsche's just published *The Birth of Tragedy*. Philology in Europe was at its zenith, one of the hardest sciences on offer, the center piece of education, the sharpest exponent if not the originator of the idea of "critical" thinking, and the paradigm of other sciences such as evolutionary biology. The dispute between the two authors was (...) about the method and meaning of classical studies. For Wilamowitz, true knowledge of any social or cultural phenomenon of the past could only be acquired by examining every feature of its historical context, and by doing so completely abstracting it from present-day perspectives. For Nietzsche, the approach of the newly professionalized (and only recently named) discipline of philology had completely deadened antiquity and perverted the true aim of its study; the philologists them. (Pollock 2009, 931-932)

Moreover, this debate still exists. In 2010 the worldwide renowned scholar of Germanic philology Tom Shippey claims:

> Many years ago I was interviewing candidates for an important university scholarship, and one candidate was said to be the best philosopher of his year at the University of Oxford. He told us that he was studying the concept of "God" in Augustine, and that he was focusing on the difference in Augustine's writings between "a god" and "the god" and "God". I thought about this for a minute or two, and then asked curiously – for I thought I must have misunderstood and be asking a silly question – "but Augustine wrote in Latin, which has neither a definite nor an indefinite article. So how can you tell what he meant when he wrote deus?" The brilliant young philosopher gaped at me. He had not thought of that. He did not get the scholarship, and all the philosophers were very angry with me, but what could I say? I am a philologist. These things are important to me. I know very little of concepts of god, but something about concepts of grammar.
>
> And there is here a difference of temperament as well. It was the philosopher William James who pointed this out. We all, he wrote, have two impulses in us, but we have them in different proportions. One is the impulse to generalise, to organise facts into systems and patterns, to see how things are connected. The other is to look at details, at specifics, to see how things are different. They should of course be balanced, but I would suggest that philosophers are the generalisers, the ones with the telescope. Philologists are the scrutinisers, the ones with the microscope.
>
> (...) Philosophy is too important to be left to philosophers. Philosophy deals with the great questions of human life, and anyone who has lived for very long is at least aware of them. Why must we die? Why are our lives so different from each other? Is there no justice in the world? Are we merely the victims of chance? (...)
>
> Now, in our time, academic philosophers have ceased to have much to do with ordinary people. They do not talk the same language, and the language of academic philosophers is more and more impenetrable. (Shippey 2014, 22 sq.)

As a philosopher (or, more modestly, a philosophy scholar) myself, I know that sometimes philosophers reciprocated and opposed the exaggerated claims of some philologists: "our digging out and collecting of erudite details is sufficient to build the history of any human matter". The silliness of such claims was well described, for example, by philosopher Benedetto Croce (who highly prized philology and was a philologist himself). (Croce 1921, 12-26)

Also, when Shippey says that philosophers generalise, whereas philologists care about details, this seems to me too simplistic. On one hand many philosophers immerse themselves in a veritable forest of detailed distinctions (for example Aristotle's writings on logic, such as *Prior Analytics, Posterior Analytics* etc.); on the other hand, philologists too generalise, speculate and theorise, both in textual criticism and linguistics, as I will show below.

Finally, Shippey seems to suggest that there is just one kind of knowledge, a sort of epistemological reductionism! But to me it appears obvious that philosophy of language *does not* substitute phonetics, and Aristotle's or Rawls's ethical reflections on justice *do not* substitute the government's calculations of house taxes and Hegel's dialectics *do not* substitute S. J. Gould's analysis of the genetic variation of Caribbean molluscs (even though Gould reflected on and admired Hegelian dialectics). And when Shippey insinuates that philosophy is too important to be left to

philosophers, I agree with him that many "philosophers" are narrow-minded and have little influence on thought in general (nevertheless most politicians are not Cromwell, and most chemists are not Lavoisier!).

Is it really possible that a lone individual, reflecting on the events of his life, has the capacity to conceive ideas such as human rights, the evolution of species, the separation of powers, the objections to Manichaeism, the free market, the development of sexuality, and so on? I think that – although it is certainly not necessary to have read original philosophical texts – in order to philosophize *well* one needs ideas that derive from (great) philosophers.

I agree that that 'young philosopher' mentioned by Shippey really failed while approaching an ancient text without knowing the language. But this does not make Shippey win the day. I rather agree with Giambattista Vico and Benedetto Croce who famously said: philology is blind without philosophy, and philosophy is empty without philology. Both are incapable of becoming History, if each one of them stays alone.

Philologia et Philosophia Geminae Hortae[1]

Stimulated by Shippey's intellectual pugnacity, I produced an original research (since there were no others around) to contrast this alleged superior autonomy of philology, and, also, to provide new evidence to support Vico' and Croce's fundamental idea. My research suits the following (non-fallacious) *ad hominem* argument: almost all the best philologists during philology golden age were in fact influenced by philosophers.

The Classical philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff wrote that Vico and the ideas of the philosopher Herder inspired his interest in the history of peoples and unconscious, collective artistic creation, and that only after this was he able to understand legends: without these philosophers comparative linguistics would have been impossible. In particular, von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff cites the influence of Kant on the philologist G. Hermann and of the philosopher Scheiermacher on the philologist Bekker's textual criticism (von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1982, 109, 115).

The philologist S. Timpanaro writes that the Swiss philologist J.C. Orelli was influenced by the philosopher Pestalozzi. (Timpanaro 2006, 90)

The Danish philologist N. F. S. Grundtvig (held in high regard by Tolkien because of his clever critical edition of *Beowulf*) after reading the German philosopher Schelling's essay *Bruno* about the noted 16th century Italian philosopher, wrote "I dared to acknowledge the truth: reality holds no joy for me...I looked for life in his *Bruno*". He also wrote a poem, *Gottlieb Fichte*, addressed to Schelling: "your gigantic voice ... wakened me from my false tranquillity, wakened me to doubt and belief, reminded me of the light of truth and the blossoms of love". Grundtvig's interest for Nordic mythology arose from reading the works of the philosopher F. Schlegel[2].

Benedetto Croce thought that philosophers and historians came together for the first time in the Romantic movement, giving birth to a new philological school and to works like *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* and *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. (*cf.* Croce 1921, 278)

The philologist W.P. Lehmann writes that the philosopher Leibniz studied historical linguistics and helped the philologist J.C. Adelung to find material for his *Mithridates*. Lehmann also writes that in 1808 the philosopher F. Schlegel published *Über die Sprache und die Weisheit der Indien* in which – using comparative anatomy as a model – he sought evidence regarding the genealogy of languages in comparative grammar. Four years after this work, the anatomist G. Cuvier published his popular treatise on comparative anatomy *Recherches sur des ossemens fossils de quadrupeds*. Philologist Franz Bopp's 1816 work on the system of conjugation in Sanskrit compared to those of Greek, Latin, Persian and German, *Über das Conjugationssytem der Sanskritsprache in Vergleichung mit jenem der griechischen, lateinischen, persischen und germanischen Sprache*, had no need of further models. Three years after Bopp's book, Jacob Grimm published the first volume of *Deutsche Grammatik* and – after having read the book *Undersøgelse om det gamle Nordiske eller Islandske Sprogs Oprindelse* by philologist R. Rask (1818) – rewrote it, formulating the basic rules of what became historical phonology[3].

Jacob Grimm would certainly have known Vico through Savigny, who appreciated him and recommended his works to Niebuhr (another of the Grimm brothers' intellectual forebears), and through Herder in Germany, who knew Vico's writings well[4]. The influence of Kant on Grimm's mentor Savigny was also important (see studies by Wieacker, Kiefner and Meder). (*cf.* Toews 2004) His reception of post-Kantian idealism (Fichte, Fries, Schlegel, Höerderlin) is documented by Rückert (1984, 232-300) and Nörr (1994). In 1841 Jacob Grimm admitted that his cultural interests had been shaped not so much by the Romantic notion of culture that developed in successive stages, as by the experience of "shame and humiliation' he underwent when his homeland was occupied by a foreign power. In response to this threat to his national identity, he put the historical principle to use not so much to grasp the present as to sum up the past, so as to construct a past that could function as an 'invisible umbrella against the enemy's arrogance'". (Toews 2004, 320) To assert one's own identity, one had to recreate the world in which one's own tongue had attained its first meanings. Jacob dedicated his *Deutsche Grammatik* to Savigny, because, when his father had died in 1796, he had been taken in as an orphan by Savigny, together with his four brothers and sister, entering into a new world of friendships and family connections. (Toews 2004, 294, 319, 320, 330) Nevertheless, in 1850 Grimm wrote a theoretical essay influenced by philosophers Schelling, Schlegel, Herder, Hegel and Von Humboldt. (Meli 1992, 49-50)

Franz Bopp, a German linguist known for extensive work on the origins of Indo-European languages, at Aschaffenburg was attracted to oriental languages by the lectures of Karl J Windischmann – a philosopher influenced by Schelling who was full of enthusiasm for Indian philosophy – and further stimulated by F. Schlegel's book, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indien* (Heidelberg, 1808).

Concerning the great philologist Karl Lachmann, Germanic, Classical and Biblical scholar, Timpanaro writes that there is a parallel between the *stemmata codicum* of textual criticism and the "genealogical tree" of languages introduced by Schleicher in comparative linguistics.

(*cf.* Timpanaro 2006, 121-122) Schleicher thought that phonological changes were corruptions of an original "perfection", analogous to the textual errors that accumulate along the *stemma codicum* of a manuscript-archetype. (*Ibid.*) Lachmann exaggerated in his under-valuation of the *codices recentiores*, much as contemporary scholars under-valued the more recent tongues, believing that Sanskrit (being the oldest known tongue) preserved the most ancient and original form of all languages, and was thus the most "perfect". (Timpanaro 2006, 125-126)

One might have thought that textual critics such as Lachmann perhaps took their ideas from comparative linguistics, but the converse is more likely (from textual criticism to comparative linguistics). According to Timpanaro, though, neither hypothesis is correct: Schleicher was inspired by the natural sciences model and not that of classical philology, holding that comparative linguistics was not historical, but rather a *Naturorganismus*. Timpanaro sees a common origin for textual criticism, comparative anatomy in a sort of "comparative mentality" that was widespread in the early19th century. (Timpanaro 2006, 128)

The philologist Fiesoli narrates that in the Berlin *Dreiftaltigkeitsfriedhof* Lachmann's tomb may be seen next to that of the philosopher Schleiermacher, since before he died Lachmann asked to be buried beside the friend who had been "always close to him during mortal life". (Fiesoli 2000, 109, 127, 129, 130, 133, 135) Frequent epistolary exchanges between the two scholars and the laudatory dedication to Schleiermacher in the *Incipit* of Lachmann's *Rechenschaft* are sufficient proofs of their reciprocal esteem. Moreover, Lutz-Hensel noted the similarity of the words both used when comparing "good conjectures" with respect to "bad manuscripts".

Philosopher Schleiermacher in his *Vorlesungen* wrote that "philological" criticism coincides with the "historical", because it is necessary first to reconstruct the "fact" (the original document): there are two kinds of philological criticism, and only the second of these is suitable for evaluating a document's level of reliability. He shared Lachmann's diffidence towards *codices recentiores* and rare variants. (*Ibid.*) According to the philosopher, Lachmann had only one final step to take: that of adding critical analysis to hermeneutic analysis. And it was precisely this that Lachmann began to do in his *editio maior* of the New Testament. Here when defining "*recensio*" and "*emendatio*", Lachmann uses a "philosophical" – rather than "philological" – style; he theorizes and shapes "universals". Thus Lachmann closes the hermeneutic circle inspired by Schleiermacher, with a famous distinction between "*verum*" and "*veri simile*". (*Ibid.*)

Philologist M. Olender writes that the Semitic language philologist J.-E. Renan read philosopher Herder's works at Saint-Sulpice and felt as though he were "entering a temple(...) It was exactly what I was looking for, the combination of a highly religious with a critical spirit [...] so that I might be more a philosopher without ceasing to be a Christian".(Olender 2008, 86, 88, 90, 93-94) He also writes that the Indo-European philologist Adolphe Pictet in 1820 in Paris became interested in the philosopher V. Cousin and dreamed of founding with him a "*Revue Philosophique"*. During the winter of 1821-2 Pictet made a philosophical pilgrimage to Germany and met Goethe, Schelling, Schleiermacher and Hegel. (*Ibid.*)

A. Schleicher – influenced by Positivist philosophy – tried to shape a Darwinian model for linguistics as a "natural science", but Steinberg (1897, 360 sq.) wrote that this idea of linguistics as *Naturorganismus* derived from Hegel, the philosophy of whom Schleicher had studied in Bonn and espoused when at Tübingen. Schleicher knew the Darwinian model only indirectly, from the writings of the philosopher H. Spencer, who had in fact published his idea of the evolution of species before Darwin and Wallace, but Spencer at that time – as Lamarck – believed in the inheritance of acquired characteristics rather than natural selection.

The Germanic philologist W. P. Ker in his *Epic and Romance* (1896) discussed at length (for dozens of pages) the *Poetics* of the philosopher Aristotle.

H. U. Gumbrecht writes that philologist von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff was under the influence of the philosopher Herder's writings, and that his disciple, philologist W. Jaeger, "saw a decisive potential for the renovation of Classical philology in the writings of Nietzsche and Dilthey". (Gumbrecht 2003, 51)

Lachmann's method suffered a crisis in the late 19th century when von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff realized that it could not be applied mechanically: tradition is complex, the scholar needs to know the "culture" of Antiquity and the Middle Ages and pay attention to "internal" criteria (*lectio difficilior, usus scribendi*). Even the most suspect *codex* might harbour a correct variant. Meanwhile, comparative linguistics also experienced a crisis: J. Schmidt and P. Kretschener (Germanic philologists) and H. Schuchardt (a Romance philologist) proposed a "horizontal theory": kinship between tongues occurs through reciprocal influences and not genealogical descent. Much as in the 1850s and 60s scholars of languages and textual critics had breathed a common evolutionist and comparative air, so at the end of the 19th century they both began to breathe a different air: the reaction against Positivist philosophy. This gave more importance to the study of the origins of Romance – and even living – languages and modified the proposed kinship relations between the Indo-European tongues. (Timpanaro 2006, 127 sq.)

The philologist G. Nencioni (1989, 65-67) writes that this reaction against Positivism by the philosophers Rickert, Dilthey, Windelband, Bergson, Simmel and Bradley influenced linguistics as well; more importance came to be given to individual linguistic creativity and logical faculties – as may be seen in the work of Schuchardt and Gillieron. They argue against the concept of "regularity" in phonetic change and the "collectivity" of linguistic inspiration; for them each word has its own life, both semantic and phonetic; they criticize the concept of "idiomatic unity" and emèphasize the individuality of each linguistic datum. For Gillieron the word is the focus of linguistic investigation (see e.g. his *'Scier' dans la Gaule Romane*).

In 1922 philosopher Benedetto Croce – in a review of work by one of his followers, German philologist Karl Vossler – spoke of a crisis in linguistics: in the mid-19th century the "phonological law" had been considered a "natural law", whereas it had come to be understood by scholars in the field as "scientific" and "abstract", revealing its limits in the field of etymology, that is in the face of real "historical" problems. (Nencioni 1989, 72)

In his *Individualismus* (1923, *Festschrift für W. Streitberg*) H. Schuchardt referred to himself

as “an idealist” like Vossler, agreeing with Croce's theory that language is an “aesthetic expression”, but adding that it is above all “communication” (Nencioni 1989, 17). Schuchardt saw these two views not as contradicting one other, but as being complementary: “expression” comes first, but we have language only if there is “communication”. If there were just “expression” – as Vossler and Croce said – all grammatical changes would be due to individual speakers, whereas they are almost always produced by the linguistic community. (Nencioni 1989, 36)

Philologist W. von Wartburg in *Einführung in Problematik und Methodik der Sprachhwissenschaft* (Halle, 1943) wrote that Vossler always tended to treat language as “expression”, that is as Saussure’s “parole”, seeing only what is new, without being able to determine the relationships between the new and the old. (Nencioni 1989, 37)

Cultural Changes and Educational Issues

I said ‘the golden age of philology’, because, after WWII, it started declining and its decline is accelerating in our time. The already mentioned Pollock says:

> [for some scholars] philology has ceased to be. It is a “now defunct field,” a “protohumanistic empirical science” that “no longer exists as such,” its decline “a conspicuous and puzzling fact.” To some degree, we philologists have brought this crisis upon ourselves and have permitted such breath-taking ignorance to persist through our failure to make a strong case for our discipline either explicitly or by our practices. (...) there are striking variations in the state of philology across the world. In India, it is perilously close to the point of no return, and whether coming generations will even be able to read the texts of their traditions is now all too real a question. (Pollock 2009, 934 -935)

Not just Sanskrit. I asked Tom Shippey whether today there are young researchers able to prepare "critical editions" of ancient or medieval texts in Germanic languages, and Shippey replied that no, there are not, at least in the English-speaking world. A reply which at first amazed me. But then I asked a similar question to Saverio Cannistra, who was a researcher in Romance philology at Scuola Normale in Pisa under a professor considered at the time the foremost scholar in the field, Gianfranco Contini. I asked him about the current state of Romance philology and he told me that critical editions are no longer made, at least in Italy. I don't want to exaggerate this point since I don't know how much or in what way Romance philology is pursued in France or Spain, and I didn't ask Shippey how and to what extent Germanic philology is studied in Germany or Norway. However, these two pieces of evidence made me reflect a little on the cultural history of the 20th century.

If Athens cries, Sparta does not laugh, as the Italian proverb says. I mean, although it seems that students, departments, conferences and books of philosophy are many more than the correspondents of philology, this can be an illusion.

In fact, as Shippey remarked, the dialogue between the academic ‘philosophers’ has become increasingly impenetrable and often unable to meet the existential needs of the common man; precisely those needs – mentioned by Shippey - that gave birth to philosophy and sustained its

development throughout the centuries. The themes that today circulate in books and conferences of philosophy too often seem a sterile mimicking of the extreme specialization of the natural sciences. With a seriously problematic difference though: while the biologist finds his research objects in nature, too often the philosopher can find them in the transient cultural fashions adopted by his/her colleagues. This struggle for catching up with the academic fashions is an activity that drains time and energies, so that the scholar might be absorbed by minutiae, neglect the basics and therefore be vulnerable to Shippey's other objection, the anecdote of the brilliant philosopher of Augustine who did not know Latin.

A new perspective could come from a deep reform of the philosophy syllabus that prevails in the universities of our time. History of philosophy should be the new basis: mandatory comprehensive courses of Ancient, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary philosophy. It should be also the new central methodological criteria: every particular philosophical discipline, for example philosophy of politics, should be a course of "history of" philosophy of politics. In this way both the students and the teachers would repeatedly, continually focus on the texts of the great (and also not so great) authors, inevitably having to cope with historical details and language expertise.

At the same time the philology syllabus could be reformed: the traditional focus on poetry, literary prose and political history made philologists focus on very minor texts, while neglecting the philosophical ones. There are hundreds of handwritten texts of medieval philosophy (both in Latin and Greek) that have never been translated in modern languages, let alone bestowed with a critical edition, and they include classics like John Duns Scotus, Albert the Great and Bernard de Clairvaux. Good for the classicists, you could object, but what about Germanists and Romanists? Although it is true that the most important printed vernacular works of the Early Modern era philosophers have been critically edited, there are still hundreds of works of followers of Descartes, Locke and Hegel that have not. In this way, new generations of philologists could become closely acquainted with themes and methods of the philosophical tradition and overcome that mixture of suspicion and hauteur we have seen at the beginning of this paper.

Endnotes:

1. Philology and philosophy share a common birth; cf. B. Croce, *The Philosophy of G. B. Vico*, London: Howard Latimer Ltd., 1913, pp. 29- 33.
2. For quotations in this section, see *N.F.S. Grundtvig: a Life Recalled. An Anthology of Biographical Source-Texts*, ed. S. A. J. Bradley, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008, pp. 377, 416, 543.
3. W.P. Lehmann*, Historical Linguistics: an Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 2003. The philologist W. D. Whitney, *La vie du langage*, Paris: Librairie Germer, 1875, p. 261, also thought that the birth of linguistics was brought about by the speculations of philosophers such as Leibniz and Herder.
4. Cf. G. Marini, *Jacob Grimm e Vico*, "Bollettino di Studi Vichiani" 1974. The only philosophy Grimm accepted was that useful for understanding history, not the systematic philosophy of Christian Wolff. For thoughts on philosophy in Grimm's works, see: J. Grimm, *Kleiner Schriften*, Bd. 8, Berlin: Dümmler, 1864-1884, pp. 32-33; Grimm's letter to Savigny, after the latter had published *Vom Beruf unsrer Zeit für Gesetzgebung und Rechtswissenschaft* (in *Briefe der Bruder Grimm an Savigny*, Berlin 1953, pp. 171-178, in particular p. 173); Grimm's review of Wilhelm Muller's *Geschichte und System*

der altdeutschen Religion, which says: "If you want to call this speculative attitude 'philosophical spirit', I would rather philosophize outside of things and not within them" (cf. G. Marini, *Jacob Grimm e Vico*) .

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