

History as a Weapon: T. H. Green, Empiricism, and the New Science of Mind

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Abstract

This paper examines the surprising role a late 19th-century controversy over the scientific status of psychology played in scholarship written during that era on the history of philosophy. One side—led by T. H. Green and other erstwhile students of the Plato scholar Benjamin Jowett—contended that the history of philosophy shows that philosophical assumptions that underpin the purported science of mind dead-end in skepticism. Defenders of naturalistic psychology—including G. H. Lewes, T. H. Huxley, E. B. Titchener, and later Norman Kemp Smith—looked to admired historical figures of their own to substantiate the view that philosophical reflection must be intimately connected with a properly empirical science of mind. The upshot is that the controversy over psychology’s viability as a natural science was partly fought on the battlefield of historical interpretation. This battle has an under-appreciated legacy: I contend that our contemporary concept of empiricism—including the idea of a British tradition whose central figures are Locke, Berkeley, and Hume—is in part a by-product of this now-forgotten fight over psychology. In making my case, I offer a new analytical framework for tracing historical-theoretical concepts (like empiricism) through time. These concepts are bicephalous in that they typically pick out *both* a canonical set of authors, *and* a shared set of ideas that are supposed to tie the authors into a single tradition. It can be hard for historians to trace the evolution of such concepts because the two aspects of such concepts can change independently, as they apparently did in the case under consideration. The framework I develop in this paper is designed to help investigate the evolution of tradition-concepts generally, and I put it to work in my examination of how the concept of empiricism evolved.

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1. Titchener Reads Plato

Less than two years before his death, the Regius Professor of Greek joined an intellectual battle. Benjamin Jowett—master of Oxford’s Balliol college and an admired reverend—had made ancient philosophy his life’s work. Yet the fight had little directly to do with his masterpiece, a five-volume translation of Plato’s *Dialogues* first published in 1871.¹ It had little to do with his unorthodox sermons and lectures on Christian doctrine, such as those his prized student Thomas Hill Green had anonymously edited (Jowett, Green, and Smith 1861).²

The fight was over psychology—over whether there could ever be a natural science of the human mind—and it had been instigated by his former pupils, Green chief among them. Jowett entered the fray by inserting a tirade against the new science of mind into his third edition of Plato’s *Dialogues*. The essay was entitled “On the Nature and Limits of Psychology,” and he incorporated it into the *Theaetetus*’s scholarly introduction (Jowett 1892).

Supplementing a translator’s commentary on an ancient Greek text might seem an unlikely way to participate in a debate about a new science. Yet the *Theaetetus* introduction drew a rejoinder from one of the preeminent experimental psychologists of the English-speaking world. E. B. Titchener, himself a product of Jowett’s Oxford and later of Wilhelm Wundt’s Leipzig laboratory, responded vigorously in *The Philosophical Review*.³

The year before Jowett’s essay appeared, Titchener had founded an outstanding psychological laboratory at Cornell—it was possibly the most advanced such laboratory outside Germany at that time.⁴ He quickly became the *de facto* leader of Wundt-style experimentalism in the English-speaking world, so he responded to Jowett with considerable authority.

¹ The first edition consisted of four volumes, with the fifth appearing only with the second edition of 1875.

² On Green’s anonymous editing of the Jowett volume, see (Tyler 2010).

³ During his undergraduate years at Oxford, Titchener apparently had some interaction with Jowett. Titchener wrote that he felt “much personal regret” at having to publish “a so generally adverse criticism” of his former teacher (Titchener 1893, 455).

⁴ This was James McKeen Cattell’s judgment, who suggested that the Cornell laboratory was then better funded than any in the world, aside from Wundt’s (Cattell 1898, 655). Titchener described the design, function, and funding of his laboratory in (Titchener 1898).

The core of the controversy concerned experimental psychology's aims and ambitions (Titchener 1893, 454). Jowett had complained that the science of mind pretended to be "a kind of metaphysic"—that is, that psychology sought to provide a scientific alternative to a priori metaphysics (Jowett 1892, 176, quoted at Titchener 1893, 454). But Jowett called psychology a "sham" science, one "which no logic ever put to the test" (Jowett 1892, 177). Psychologists were guilty of making a "false analogy [to] Physical Science" for their field (Jowett 1892, 176). So not only could it never replace metaphysics—the science of mind could never even be a science, according to Jowett.

Why did he think psychology could not be a science? His central concern was that psychology's observational evidence came principally from introspection on the researcher's own mind. But he held that minds are at least partly constituted by their own intellectual and religious environment, so that one cannot generalize from observing a single mind, particularly when that mind is taken in isolation from its wider intellectual circumstances (Jowett 1892, 176). Jowett also claimed (following Kant)⁵ that psychology cannot be a natural science because it studies conscious experience, and conscious experience supposedly cannot be "subjected to observation and experiment" (Jowett 1892, 176). He ridiculed psychologists for acting as though they had invented a magic lens "through which, as through some new optical instrument limiting the sphere of vision, the interior of thought and sensation is examined" (Jowett 1892, 176).

Jowett's claim that empirical psychologists sought to develop a scientific replacement for speculative metaphysics was not entirely uncharitable, at least when it came to figures like Titchener. In his rejoinder Titchener indeed suggested that empirical psychology *should* take priority over metaphysics, though in some sense he did not precisely specify:⁶

⁵ Kant's famous claim, that empirical psychology could never achieve the status of a natural science because experience is neither mathematizable nor experimentally manipulatable, can be found at (Kant 1786/2004, 7-8 [4: 471]). See (Hatfield 1992) for a nuanced discussion of Kant's actual views on psychology. Readers also interested in Hegel's related critique of empirical psychology should consult (Tolman 2001).

⁶ Titchener would later take what was then a common position among psychologists, that that the job of metaphysics is to synthesize the special results of all the department sciences, including psychology (Titchener 1896, 3, 127).

There can hardly be a sound metaphysic without a sound psychology; and, until this has been furnished, the psychologist naturally distrusts metaphysical construction. (Titchener 1893, 458)

Going back to at least Hume, one finds a strain of British thought that mistrusts the endless dialectical disputes of a priori metaphysics, and that regards empirical investigation of the mind as providing the only real basis for philosophical progress. Some of the more radical psychologists in the 19th century regarded their field as finally fulfilling the promise of providing just such a scientific basis for philosophy.

So what was Jowett's proposed alternative to a scientific study of the mind? He gave a clear answer: "one of the deepest and noblest modes of studying" the human mind is when the mind's development is "traced in the histories of religions and philosophies and in the thoughts of nations." This is a striking suggestion. For Jowett, to understand the mind we must not look to science, but to *history*—specifically, to the history of philosophy and religion. Thus he wrote that psychology was "not a branch of natural science" at all, but more properly "a part of the history of philosophy, ... an aspect of Metaphysic" (Jowett 1892, 185).⁷

I have sketched a few of Jowett's reasons for thinking that science cannot give real insight into the mind. But why did he think that historical scholarship was more promising? About a decade earlier, a rationale for this sort of view had been laid out by the Scottish idealist William Ritchie Sorley,⁸ who had written:

⁷ The thought that mind must be studied through intellectual history has Hegelian overtones, and this is likely no accident. Jowett learned about Hegel during an 1844 – 1845 trip to Germany, a trip he had undertaken for theological study. He would later be instrumental in popularizing Hegel among the younger generation at Oxford, including T. H. Green, Edward Caird, and Bernard Bosanquet. And Jowett did attribute to Hegel the idea that minds must be studied through an examination of intellectual history (Plato and Jowett 1892, III.ccviii). Still, it was apparently more the spirit than the letter of Hegel that influenced Jowett. He would come to criticize his own students for an over-reliance on the German metaphysician (Mander 2011, 30 – 31). And one of Green's Oxford students—Samuel Alexander—reports that Jowett once told him: "It's a great thing to have read the whole of Hegel; but now that you have read him, I advise you to forget him again" (Farber 1994, 105).

⁸ Mander says that Sorley's formative education was at Edinburgh, though he also spent lengthy periods at Trinity College, Cambridge (where he would have overlapped with McTaggart), from 1879 to 1888 and again from 1900 to 1933. For more on Sorley, see (Mander 2011, 30, 219 – 20, 405 – 07).

But while every science has its history more or less closely connected with it, the historical part is in some cases merely a new department of investigation added on to the old without exerting any modifying effect upon it. This is the case with all those sciences whose subject-matter is definite and unchanging. ... But the case may be ... more complicated The customs, conduct, and relations of which the *social sciences* treat are in many ways modified by the theories about them held by those whose relations to one another and to circumstances are being traced. (Sorley 1883, 102 – 03, italics mine)

This is an intriguing thought. Human minds are unlike virtually anything else we study in science in that minds self-represent—that is, they form theories of themselves. Jowett and his idealist allies supposed that the actual operation of any given mind—perhaps even the perceptual phenomena on which empirical psychologists often focus—is continually being modified by such self-representation. If they are right, then the study of mind must take account of *theories* of mind, particularly as those theories developed historically.⁹

In fact, Jowett seems to think that our minds are so thoroughly determined by their self-representations that psychology’s proper task really must be to study intellectual history. This is why Jowett holds that we learn what we need about the mind not from any supposed experiment or introspective observation, but from the history of philosophy and religion.

Jowett’s view helps shed light on what might seem like a bizarre quirk of the late 19th century controversy over psychology—namely, why one finds a debate over the mind’s scientific tractability carried out in texts on the history of philosophy. For it is not only Jowett who attacked Victorian psychologists in the pages of history books. Perhaps the most important such attack came from T. H. Green in *his* scholarly introduction to Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, a text I will discuss later.¹⁰

⁹ Another idealist who made a similar argument was Jowett’s student David Ritchie (Mander 2011, 31), who wrote: “We can only properly and fairly study the human Mind by studying what man has done in the world (language, institutions, religions, art, &c.)” and went on to parlay this idea into a criticism of empirical psychology (Hodgson et al. 1887, 9, 21). Thanks to Anthony Fisher for calling my attention to Ritchie’s position and to the symposium in which Ritchie’s remarks appear.

¹⁰ Other examples of late 19th-century historical texts that weigh in on the controversy over psychology include, e.g., (Caird 1889, II.96 – 101, Huxley 1874/1894, 1879, esp. 48 – 50, 74, Robertson 1886, 230 – 31). Anthony Fisher

These idealist criticisms generally operated on two levels. First, they were directly attacking some Lockean assumptions on which they thought the new science of psychology was premised (this was Green's primary strategy). Attacking Lockean assumptions was a job for 19th-century *historical* work because Hume had supposedly exposed the essential flaws in these assumptions, an exposé that, according to Green, had long been forgotten. But at a meta level, idealists were also contending that history itself was a more appropriate tool for understanding the mind than naturalistic psychology. *Through* history of philosophy we get an account of mind—not through any supposed science of mind.

Psychologists and their allies would return the volley, directly defending the prospect of a natural science of mind against the idealists' meta-level criticism. But they would also develop first-order responses—right on the playing field of historical scholarship, so to speak—offering fundamentally different readings of British philosophers, including Hume in particular.

The most influential, first-order response came from Norman Smith (later Kemp Smith), whose two-part *Mind* essay of 1905, "The Naturalism of Hume," was framed as a direct reply to Green's reading.¹¹ As I just mentioned, Green had depicted Hume as drawing purely skeptical conclusions from the purported failures of Locke and Berkeley rationally to justify our beliefs in persisting, independent selves or material bodies (Smith 1905, 149). In contrast, Smith wrote that the "chief aim of Hume's philosophy is to prove that, save as regards those relations upon which the mathematical sciences are based, belief never rests on reason or insight." Instead, for Smith's Hume, beliefs are "due to the ultimate instincts or propensities that constitute our human nature" (Smith 1905, 151). The upshot is not skepticism, but that the "science of human nature"—something that prefigures the new experimental psychology of the 19th century—is the way

points out to me that James Ward's famous entry on psychology in the Encyclopedia Britannica also connects a "time-honoured" clash between "Empiricism and Rationalism" with a dispute between psychologists and "epistemologists (notably Kant)." This remark appears in the eleventh edition (Ward 1886/1911, 549), but not the ninth (Ward 1886/1899). I have not been able to examine the tenth edition.

¹¹ The Hume scholar John Wright says that Smith's 1905 essay "was to affect radically the direction of Hume scholarship in the 20th century." Smith also produced an influential 1941 volume on Hume that would articulate in more detail a fundamentally similar, naturalistic reading of Hume (Wright 2007, 17 – 18).

forward in “theory of knowledge” as well as in “ethics, aesthetics, politics, and political economy” (Smith 1941, 155).

If Smith was cautious in explicitly connecting Hume’s “science of human nature” to modern psychology, other allies of the new psychology were less shy. For instance, in his earlier book on Hume, Thomas Huxley wrote that in order to answer philosophy’s most basic questions, “we must have recourse to that investigation of mental phenomena, the results of which are embodied in the science of psychology” (Huxley 1879, 48). He claimed that Hume’s great insight was to have developed this important point. Hume

clearly recognized the fact that philosophy is based on psychology; and that the inquiry into the contents and the operations of the mind must be conducted upon the same principles as a philosophical investigation, if what he calls the “moral philosopher” would attain results of as firm and definite a character as those which reward the “natural philosopher.” (Huxley 1879, 50 – 51)

Hume’s lesson, according to Huxley, was that philosophy will only make genuine progress when it begins its investigations with an empirical, scientific study of the mind. In other words, philosophy must be based on psychology.

To be sure, the historical work on this side of the aisle was not meant to operate at the idealists’ meta level—the psychologists and their allies were not constructing a theory of mind *through* history of philosophy. But both sides claimed that early modern British philosophers had discovered crucial, now-forgotten insights about the mind, and they disagreed sharply on just what those insights were. Most importantly, they disagreed on whether those insights vitiated or supported the prospect of a natural science of psychology.

To summarize the situation, Jowett and his allies saw the study of our intellectual history as the only real way to explain the human mind as it is now constituted. And they drew from the history of British philosophy what they took to be neglected arguments that an empirical science of mind inevitably collapses in skepticism. In contrast, Titchener and others sympathetic to the new psychology looked to admired historical figures (like Hume) as providing philosophical

groundwork for the empirical science of mind.¹² The upshot is that the controversy over psychology's viability as a natural science in the late 19th century was partly fought on the battlefield of historical interpretation.

In what follows, I argue that the exchange between Jowett, Titchener, and the others was not just an unusual quirk, but was emblematic of a deeper trend in the late 19th century. As empirical psychology was attempting to establish itself as a natural science, some of its staunchest critics were, of all people, historians of philosophy. I have argued elsewhere that the historians' criticisms shaped the emerging practice of empirical psychology—some of William James's empirical work on spatial perception, for instance, was crafted with an eye towards circumventing idealist criticisms of the very possibility of there being a science of mind (Klein 2009). Here, I want to turn the arrow around and examine how the fight over psychology influenced the way the historians did their work.

I shall focus on just one aspect of this influence—the role the controversy over psychology played in the rise of the now-ubiquitous narrative that divides early modern philosophy into British Empiricist and Continental Rationalist traditions. I will be focusing mainly on the former, arguing that early champions of the concept of empiricism envisioned a tradition unified by a commitment to philosophy's intimate connection with a genuine science of mind.

I begin with a few words on why one might be puzzled about how the philosophical concept of empiricism arose at all.

2. A Puzzle about Empiricism

As late as 1883, the word “empiricism” was not widely used by English-speaking philosophers. At any rate, the most scholarly dictionaries listed no philosophical sense of the term at that time, from Noah Webster's erudite *American Dictionary of the English Language*

¹² A slightly younger figure who was both inspired by the new psychology and sought to defend some basically Lockean ideas about the mind—indeed, to defend them from Green's criticisms, which I examine below—was Samuel Alexander, who had studied at Balliol College, Oxford, during Green's final years. See (Fisher Forthcoming).

(1860) to John Ogilvie's then-authoritative¹³ *Imperial Dictionary of the English Language* (1883).

Such dictionaries listed two senses of "empiricist," both pejorative. In the medical fields, an empiricist was a quack, one with no formal education who practiced medicine anyway. In common language, the word signified an ignoramus, an uneducated person who had pretensions to knowledge (Ogilvie and Annandale 1883, 155, Webster 1860, 391).

If there is any doubt that these dictionaries did not give a philosophical gloss to "empiricism" because they did not cover philosophical terms of art at all, consider that Ogilvie's *Imperial Dictionary* has entries for the following philosophical terms: "metempiricism" (a term from G. H. Lewes, as we will see below), "mode" (a special sense is devoted to Locke's use of the term), "doctrine of occasional essence" (refers to the Cartesian explanation of how mind and matter interact), and "realism" (contrasted with "idealism" in metaphysics), to take just a few examples.

It is not that the philosophical sense of the word had fallen out of fashion. There never had been a consistent philosophical meaning of "empiricism" in English. None of those we think of as canonical British Empiricists described themselves using this term. Even J. S. Mill, on some accounts the last of the classic Empiricists, explicitly disavowed commitment to any position bearing the name (Van Fraassen 2002, 207).

It is clear that the concept of an Empiricist tradition was created and applied *ex post facto*. Much hay was made over this point in a literature on the meta-history of philosophy that flourished especially between the late 1950s and the early 1980s. But that literature was motivated by a negative project—historians like Bracken, Loeb, Norton, and Popkin argued that there is something illegitimate about the idea that there were two major schools in modern philosophy, Rationalists and Empiricists.¹⁴

¹³ The first fascicle of the *Oxford English Dictionary* appeared in 1884, covering A to Ant in 352 pages. It would be years before the *OED* would seriously rival Ogilvie's 4-volume behemoth, which was aptly subtitled: *Complete Encyclopedic Lexicon, Literary, Scientific, and Technological*.

¹⁴ The literature I have in mind includes (Bracken 1977-1978, Kuklick 1984, Loeb 1981, Norton 1981, 1982, Popkin 1959, 1964, Van Fraassen 2002, 201-25) (cf. Ayers 1984, Wiener 1959).

But the question where we get this standard narrative from was generally handled, in my view, in an unconvincing way. Following Alberto Vanzo (2016), one can usefully organize the most common answers to this question into three groups. Some think Thomas Reid is the key architect of the standard narrative; some think it was Kant and his students; and others think it was late 19th century Hegelians in Germany and the UK, especially Kuno Fischer and T. H. Green.¹⁵

This is not the place to assess all three conjectures, which each have virtues and deficiencies. Here I want to focus on T. H. Green and his circle. Loeb, Norton, and Garrett all claim Green was not just someone who attacked empiricism, but that he was one of the inventors, or chief popularizers, of the very concept of empiricism (Garrett 2004, Loeb 1981, 31, Norton 1981, 332-3). Green was instrumental in the revival of Hegel in Victorian Britain, of course. He and Thomas Grose had published a widely-used edition of Hume's philosophical writing. Green's *Introduction to Hume's Treatise on Human Nature* (subtitle: *Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*) ran some 371 pages. In it he grouped together Locke, Berkeley, and Hume as part of an enduring tradition. And he criticized all three from a neo-Hegelian perspective. That historical grouping is one reason Green has been suspected of inventing the empiricism concept.

A second reason for suspecting Green as the author of this narrative is that after studying at Balliol with Jowett, he would eventually become Whyte's Professor of Moral Philosophy there. His students included such Idealist luminaries as F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, Edward Caird, John Caird, and R. L. Nettleship (Loeb 1981, 31.n7). So his students eventually gained the stature and influence to spread widely whatever philosophical classifications they had learned from Green.

A third reason has to do with the full version of the modern-philosophy narrative as widely taught, today. Most philosophers have been trained to read modern philosophy not just as a battle

¹⁵ On Fischer's Hegelian methodology in history, see (Beiser 2011, 370).

over epistemological empiricism between Descartes-Spinoza-Leibniz and Locke-Berkeley-Hume. A crucial part of the story is that *Kant* is supposed to have ended the battle by showing how to synthesize what was right about the two respective positions. This is superficially similar to Green's version of events. He argues that we must read Locke, Berkeley, and Hume in order to appreciate "the intellectual necessity of the Kantian answer" (Green 1874/1894, §3, 3).

Now, Green may have contributed to the creation of the standard British Empiricism narrative by grouping Locke, Berkeley, and Hume together as the key figures of a philosophical tradition. One problem with this interpretation is that Green's *basis* for grouping these figures together was importantly different from the reasons the standard narrative offers. Green portrayed Locke, Berkeley, and Hume as unified by what we today might call "epistemological naturalism" (Rysiew 2021)—by their commitment to the continuity of philosophy and empirical science, especially empirical psychology. What historians have missed is that Green's narrative about the British philosophical tradition constituted an early and important contribution to the controversy over psychology canvassed in section one (above). The culmination of my argument for this claim comes in section five (below).

3. *Empiricism* as Historical-Theoretical Concept

Whether we are historians or not, contemporary philosophers tacitly treat concepts like empiricism and rationalism as what I shall call a "historical-theoretical concept," or HiTh concept for short. I mean that we typically take such concepts to refer not just to a philosophical thesis. We also take them to refer to a set of philosophers we group together in virtue of their common commitment to the aforementioned thesis.

Thus "empiricism" evokes a tradition whose luminaries were Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, and that was fundamentally opposed to a tradition centered around Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. "Empiricism" also evokes a family of characteristic theses that concern either knowledge or meaning. In particular, empiricists typically hold that experience is in some sense the source of all genuine knowledge, of all legitimate meaning, or both.

One can inquire about the history of the philosophical thesis that “empiricism” now denotes. That is to say, one can ask about the history of (some version of) the view that knowledge must be justified by appeal to experience. I’ll use “epistemological empiricism” to refer to this first, theoretical sense of the word “empiricism.”¹⁶

One can also inquire about the history of the historical narrative to which “empiricism” refers. In other words, one can ask about the history of the story that describes early modern philosophy as a dispute between British Empiricists and Continental Rationalists. I’ll use “British Empiricism” (capital E) when I want to refer specifically to this second sense of the word “empiricism.”

But what about the history of the total concept of empiricism—the history of the concept that evokes *both* an epistemological thesis and a historical tradition? It is difficult to trace the evolution of such concepts because they are bicephalous. What is complicated is that, at least in the case of empiricism, the theoretical and historical sides of the concept constrain each other.¹⁷ Today, we typically see epistemological empiricism as the *basis* for grouping Locke, Berkeley, and Hume together. And when we designate some contemporary thesis in, say, philosophy of science or metaphysics as “empiricist,” we evoke something more than just bare epistemological empiricism. We think epistemological empiricism has rich philosophical implications in metaphysics, ethics, and meta-ethics, implications that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume’s work is supposed to exemplify.

¹⁶ Philosophers commonly distinguish between *concept empiricism*, the view that all concepts are derived from experience, and *knowledge empiricism*, the epistemological view that all propositional knowledge derives from experience. Note that the former version of empiricism is a semantic thesis, but it is typically of interest for its epistemological implications.

¹⁷ We find a straightforward example of a definition of empiricism with two mutually-constraining parts in the preface to Garrett and Barbanell’s *Encyclopedia of Empiricism*. “Empiricism,” we read, can be used to refer to a “philosophical emphasis” on experience over a priori reasoning. It can also indicate a particular philosophical movement or tendency of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, originating and centered in Great Britain Its ... most important representatives are John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume. (Garrett and Barbanell 1997, ix)

True, the authors continue, these thinkers did not call themselves “Empiricists.”

Nevertheless, they and the thinkers most directly influenced by them clearly conceived of themselves as seeking a more experiential basis for philosophy. In that sense, although they lacked the term, they conceived of themselves as empiricists. (Garrett and Barbanell 1997, x)

HiTh concepts like “empiricism” and “rationalism” afford intellectual economy. Because we expect to have had similar professional training, we expect one another to have learned roughly similar narratives about the history of philosophy—and this allows us to use words like “empiricism” as shorthand not just for an epistemological thesis, but for an entire philosophical project, very broadly construed.

This is to say that we tacitly treat empiricism as a higher-order concept. It picks out a philosophical thesis *and* a historical narrative, both of which are mutually constraining. I propose the following schema to capture how such concepts typically function.

HISTORICAL-THEORETICAL (HiTh) CONCEPT X EXPRESSES:

1. A philosophical thesis or stance that was affirmed or developed by the figures in (2)
2. A historical narrative according to which of canonical set of historical figures, S, are to be grouped together in virtue of their contributions to the development of the thesis or stance in (1)

It seems clear that these higher-order concepts themselves can have histories. Historical interpretations, after all, are not simply views from nowhere, but are created—often by philosophers, and sometimes for interesting philosophical reasons.

Here I am primarily interested in the history of the HiTh concept of empiricism. What is immediately confounding is that the historical and theoretical parts of this concept do not seem to have developed in parallel. I take it that the structure of our *contemporary* concept of empiricism looks something like this:

TODAY'S (HiTh CONCEPT) EMPIRICISM EXPRESSES:

1. The philosophical thesis that genuine knowledge claims must be justified by appeal to experience, a thesis that was affirmed or developed by the figures in (2)
2. The historical narrative according to which Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are to be grouped together in virtue of their contributions to the development of the thesis in (1)

But when the concept of empiricism first started gaining widespread currency in the late 19th century, the key thesis associated with Locke-Berkeley-Hume was not epistemological empiricism, but something closer to the issues addressed in section one, above—these figures’

contribution to the promise of scientific psychology's playing a fundamental role in or for philosophy.

That was certainly the case with Green, who grouped Locke-Berkeley-Hume together for their supposed contribution to the (eventual) founding of a scientific psychology. What is more, one of Green's central, contemporary opponents—G. H. Lewes—was apparently one of the earliest philosophers to adopt the “empiricist” label for himself, as we will see in the next section. And Lewes embraced the theoretic side of empiricism without the Locke-Berkeley-Hume historical narrative.

In short, tracking the history of empiricism *qua* HiTh concept means tracking the development of both a philosophical thesis and a historical narrative, parts designed to fit together, but parts that nevertheless developed relatively independently.

4. The Rise of “Empiricism”: G. H. Lewes

The first figure I can find who positively embraced the “empiricist” label himself was G. H. Lewes in 1874. He adopted this label to indicate his advocacy for a scientific approach to philosophy, and for scientific psychology's being central to philosophy, anticipating the views we saw (in section one, above) expressed by Huxley, Titchener, and Smith.¹⁸ Lewes did not, however, cite Locke-Berkeley-Hume as the key ancestors of this position.¹⁹

Some background on Lewes is in order. He was a philosopher, literary critic, and psychologist who published a widely discussed, five-volume series, *Problems of Life and Mind*.²⁰ The first two volumes were entitled *The Foundations of a Creed*, and Lewes called his

¹⁸ This is not the first usage of a recognizable version of the “empiricism” label in philosophy, of course. Indeed, Kuno Fischer's use of the term in his 1865 *Geschichte der Neuern Philosophie: Descartes und seine Schule* (Fischer 1865) is closer to our current usage. (The work was only translated to English in 1887; for an illustrative example of his use of “empiricism,” see Fischer 1887, 160.) But Fischer's usage is attributional. For that matter, so was Kant's well-known usage of this term. Lewes is the first philosopher I can find writing in English who espouses the term, himself.

¹⁹ In an earlier, historical work (Lewes 1867, I.307), Lewes did say that Aristotle's critics have been “prone to despise him as an empiricist”; but this seems to be a use of the term in its pejorative sense.

²⁰ See (Lewes 1874a, b, 1877, 1879a, b). Lewes's work was often discussed by, for example, William James who reviewed the first and second volumes of *Problems of Life and Mind* for the *Atlantic* and *Nation*, respectively; see

creed “empiricism.” His use of the word was cheeky and defiant, given its broadly pejorative connotations:

By way of preliminary I will ask permission to coin a term that will clearly designate the aspect of Metaphysics which renders the inquiry objectionable to scientific thinkers, no less than to ordinary minds, because it implies a disregard of experience; by isolating this aspect in a technical term we may rescue the other aspect which is acceptable to all.... If then the *Empirical* designates the province we include within the range of Science, the province we exclude may fitly be styled the *Metempirical*. The terms Empiricism, Empiricist, Empirical, although commonly employed by metaphysicians with contempt, to mark a mode of investigation which admits no higher source than Experience (by them often unwarrantably restricted to Sensation), may be accepted without demur, since even the flavour of contempt only serves to emphasize the distinction. (Lewes 1874b, vol I, pp. 15, 17, §§13, 14)

Lewes used the word “metempirical” to mark out a sphere of inquiry (like that with which speculative metaphysics deals) that is somehow outside the range of science. Lewes styled himself one of the “scientific thinkers” who finds such inquiry “objectionable” because it shows “a disregard of experience.” In contrast, he adopted the label “empiricism,” which was to denote a “mode of investigation” that treats experience as the only source of epistemic authority.

That Lewesean empiricism regards experience as the only source of authority suggests that this concept is indeed an ancestor to our contemporary notion of empiricism. But notice Lewes’s misgivings about the view that “Sensation” alone is all we are permitted to accept. This is because he held that empiricists are to accept the testimony of experience, *and* the “co-ordination” of experiential facts by way of the “procedures of positive science” (Lewes 1874b, vol I, p. 81, §73). These procedures involve not only passive observation but also active

(James 1987, 303-07, 42-45). James calls Lewes’s “first principles ... admirable,” but ridicules the book for offering up *only* first principles and no concrete psychological discoveries—ironic given Lewes’s recommendation that the “Method of Science” be employed in philosophy.

experimental manipulation (Lewes himself was adept at physiological experimentation in particular). And they even allow the inductive or deductive “explanation” of the facts of experience by factors that may be grasped not only through “Sense” but in some cases only through “Intuition” (Lewes 1874b, vol I, pp. 5, 100 – 101). Hence Lewesean empiricism would allow for experience to be extended by scientific methods of reasoning.

The point of being an empiricist, for Lewes, was the application of what he called the “method of science” to metaphysics:

It is towards the transformation of Metaphysics by reduction to the Method of Science that these pages tend. Their object is to show that the Method which has hitherto achieved such splendid success in Science needs only to be properly interpreted and applied....

(Lewes 1874b, vol I, p. 5, §4)

Thus if Green found a concerning epistemological naturalism in Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, Lewes was a latter-day champion of this sort of position—of the view that metaphysics, insofar as it is worth pursuing, should employ properly scientific methods.

For Lewes, one reason metaphysics needed to employ scientific methods had to do with an important task to which he sought to put metaphysics. The task was to help elevate psychology into a natural science. In an introduction, he wrote that his *Problems of Life and Mind* began as an attempt to aid in the “constitution of Psychology” as a natural science. But he found his “exposition obstructed” by the widespread use of speculative, unscientific methods in accounting for conceptions fundamental to psychology, including “Force, Cause, Matter, [and] Mind.” Thus for Lewes, “empiricist” philosophy—scientific philosophy—“was intended merely as a preparation for a [scientific] Psychology” (Lewes 1874b, vol I, vi-viii).

To reinforce the connection between Lewes’s empiricism and the rising tide of thinkers of the era who see an intimate connection between psychology and philosophy, is instructive to compare his friend (and sparring partner) Huxley. In his 1879 book on Hume, Huxley had written:

On whatever ground we term physiology, science, psychology is entitled to the same appellation; and the method of investigation which elucidates the true relations of the one set of phenomena will discover those of the other. (Huxley 1879, 49)

Like Lewes, and contra critics we met in section one (like Jowett and Green), Huxley was also invested in defending psychology's claim to be a natural science. And like Lewes, Huxley insisted that philosophy becomes properly scientific through its relationship to psychology.

Unlike Lewes, though, Huxley maintained that psychology is conceptually prior to philosophy, not vice versa. "[P]hilosophy is, in great measure, the exponent of the logical consequences of certain data established by psychology," he wrote (Huxley 1879, 49). Thus in late 19th century Britain, there was a rising tide of thinkers who saw the prospect of a genuine science of psychology as standing to place philosophy on a scientific footing—either because the new science of mind will force us to develop a prior, scientific metaphysics (as Lewes had suggested) or because philosophy is mainly to be concerned with drawing out “the logical consequences” of whatever we learn from psychology (as Huxley had suggested).²¹ This is the kind of doctrine that late 19th-century British philosophers would have associated with the “empiricist” label.

Now how does the theoretical part of the empiricist concept we have been discussing—the epistemological naturalism—fit with the developing narrative that identifies Locke-Berkeley-and-Hume as key historical proponents of this tradition? The answer is not as clean as one might expect, and this is precisely where we must bear in mind the structure of HiTh concepts like empiricism—they have component parts that have not always fit together in the way we take them to fit today.

In Lewes's earlier, more explicitly historical works he does not group Locke-Berkeley-and-Hume into any special collective at all. A preface to the third edition of that work portrays its aim as “turning the mind from Metaphysics to Positive Philosophy,” and so it is no surprise that

²¹ The first editor of the journal *Mind*, George Croom Robertson, is another influential figure of the era who shared Huxley's vision of philosophy as an extension of data drawn from the science of mind (Robertson 1896, 1).

Lewes's history culminates in the work not of Hume or Mill, but of Auguste Comte (Lewes 1867, v). And in the first book of *Problems of Life and Mind*—where we find Lewes characterizing his own view with the word “empiricism”—the predecessors to this position are summed up this way:²²

In conclusion, I may here simply state my conviction that the Philosophy, in the construction of which the efforts of all nations converge, is that Positive Philosophy which began with Kepler and Galileo, Descartes and Bacon, and was first reduced to a system by Auguste Comte. (Lewes 1874b, vol I, p. 86, §78)

Lewes occasionally cited Herbert Spencer as Comte's most important successor (Lewes 1874b, vol I, p. 84, §76), but Comte is Lewes's most frequently cited, great ancestor of empiricist philosophy.²³ Lewes adopted a new label, “empiricism,” because he saw himself as building on older forms of positivism by applying the “Scientific Method” specifically to metaphysics, an application from which Comte had demurred (Lewes 1874b, vol I, pp. 6 – 7, §6).

And Huxley also did not seem to recognize the Locke-Berkeley-Hume triad. He, too, associated empiricism with a surprisingly different group:

And it is accordant with this presumption [that good philosophy requires familiarity “with the application of scientific method”], that the men who have made the most important positive additions to philosophy, such as *Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant*, not to mention more recent examples, have been deeply imbued with the spirit of physical science; and, in some cases such as those of Descartes and Kant, have been largely acquainted with its details. ... In truth, the laboratory is the fore-court of the temple of philosophy; and

²² I can find one place where Lewes cites Locke-Berkeley-Hume (along with Condillac, Hartley and James Mill) as in some way ancestors of his project—he says they made key contributions to refining observational methods in psychology (Lewes 1879a, 4). But the reference is only a passing one.

²³ Comte is often thought to have been critical of psychology's aspirations to be a natural science. So it may come as a surprise that someone like Lewes—with his defense of a scientific psychology—would be so laudatory towards Comte. But Comte's worries about psychology specifically focused on the prospective role of introspection in a genuine science (Bodenhafer 1923, 17-18). Some indication of Lewes's thinking on this subject can be found at (1874b, vol I, p. 125, §11n.), where he depicts psychology as inherently not just physiological, but also sociological—and indicates that he therefore agrees with Comte that psychology must resist an over-reliance on introspection.

whoso has not offered sacrifices and undergone purification there, has little chance of admission into the sanctuary. (Huxley 1879, 49 – 50, my italics)

Huxley was writing here about the important philosophical predecessors and fellow-travelers to Hume—he thought these included Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant due to their familiarity with scientific methods.²⁴ He elsewhere wrote that Hume is a “spiritual child and continuator” (58) of Locke. But of the moderns, it is Descartes—the scientist who also did philosophy—to whom Huxley most often turns to help place Hume’s views into context.²⁵

Hence if we want to understand how the concept of empiricism evolved and spread in English-language philosophy, our task is complex. When it was popularized, the concept had both a theoretical and a historical purport. This is precisely why it should be regarded as a HiTh concept in my sense. In Lewes’s original formulation, the theoretical purport covered twin theses—that psychology is (or can become) a natural science, and that philosophy should use scientific methods to elucidate concepts fundamental to that new science. I will refer to the theoretical purport by itself as “Lewesean naturalism.” Lewesean naturalism may give a starring epistemic role to experience, but Lewes was using “experience” to mean something broader than mere sensation, covering also experience as organized via scientific methods. Hence as Lewes used the term, “empiricism” conveyed a theoretical position distinct from, though probably ancestrally related to, our own conception of empiricism; and the related history it evoked featured Comte as the pinnacle of philosophical progress, with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume playing no particularly privileged role.

So for Lewes, we get a HiTh concept that looks something like this:

LEWESEAN EMPIRICISM (A HiTh CONCEPT) EXPRESSES:

1. The theses that psychology is (or can become) a natural science, and that philosophy should use scientific methods to elucidate concepts fundamental to this new science; these theses were developed by the figures in (2)

²⁴ And Hume is the “parent of Kant” (58).

²⁵ Descartes was a favorite figure of Huxley’s; see (Huxley 1870/1894, 1874/1894).

2. The historical narrative according to which Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Bacon, Comte, and Spencer are to be grouped together in virtue of their contributions to the development of the theses mentioned in (1)

The overall concept of an Empiricist tradition is at least distantly recognizable; but it is certainly not a national philosophy, for Lewes, and the Locke-Berkeley-Hume triad does not figure into the historical purport of this concept.²⁶

I have appealed to Huxley to flesh out my claim that there was an entire family of views on the rise during the 1870s that were closely connected with Lewes's empiricism (that is, they shared naturalistic commitments). This may help explain why the label spread. And yet, while Lewes and Huxley both cite various historical predecessors, they did not have a consistent view (between them) about exactly how this form of naturalism hooks up with a narrative about earlier philosophy. Thus, HiTh concepts like empiricism are complex. If we want to explore how they evolve and spread through time, we must attend to the way the mutually constraining parts of these concepts *each* change through time.

So how did the familiar, Locke-Berkeley-Hume historical narrative get stabilized as the historical purport of empiricism? To answer this question, we do well to turn to Jowett's erstwhile student, Green.

5. Green's Historical Narrative

The same year Lewes dubbed his "creed" "empiricism," Green brought out his *Introduction* to Hume's *Treatise*. In my view, it was Green who is chiefly responsible for wedding the Locke-Berkeley-Hume triad to the kind of empiricist theoretical view Lewes was busy defending. Again—and as we will see in more detail in this section—what was at issue was psychology's contested scientific status, and philosophy's proximity to that supposed science.

In fact, Green made quite explicit the connection between Lewes and his critical narrative about Locke-Berkeley-Hume. Three years after the *Introduction* appeared, Green published a

²⁶ Notice the explicit internationalism of Lewes's history—"the efforts of all nations converge" to produce positive philosophy.

direct attack on what he called “empirical psychology.” It was entitled “Mr. Herbert Spencer and Mr. G. H. Lewes: Their Application of the Doctrine of Evolution to Thought,” and it saddled Spencer and Lewes with the same kinds of mistakes he (Green) claimed to have identified in Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.

Green’s opening lines from that piece are striking:

At the conclusion of an inquiry, recently published, into the course and result of that philosophical movement which is represented by the names of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, I ventured to speak [in the *Introduction*] of the systems of philosophy, which since their time have found favour in England, as anachronistic, and to point by way of contrast to Kant and Hegel, as representing a real advance in metaphysical inquiry. . . . With those who look to ‘mental philosophy’ for discoveries corresponding to those of the physical sciences, the German writers referred to have become almost a by-word for unprofitableness, while the ‘empirical psychology’ of our own country has been ever showing more of the self-confidence, and winning more of the applause, which belong to advancing conquest. It had seemed to me, indeed, that a clear exposition, such as I sought to furnish, of the state of the question in metaphysics, as Hume left it, would suffice to show that it has not been met but ignored by his English followers. A fuller consideration, however, might have taught me that each generation requires the questions of philosophy to be put to it in its own language, and, unless they are so put, will not be at the pains to understand them. (Green 1877-1878/1894, 373)

Green’s *Introduction* was a piece of serious historical scholarship. But its thinly-veiled, ulterior motive—to condemn Lewes and other contemporaries who continued to treat “mental philosophy” as a kind of “physical science”—was quite directly unveiled three years later.

The *Introduction* itself contains clear intimations of this aim. Green had written that Hume’s “successors” in “England and Scotland” have been unable to look Hume’s skepticism “in the face” (Green 1874/1894, 2). Green characterized those “successors” as “psychologists,” those who “have gone on elaborating Hume’s doctrine of association,” and those for whom “the

‘philosophy of mind’ seems to assume the character of a natural science” (Green 1874/1894, 2, 7). He called their chief intellectual project “empirical psychology” (Green 1874/1894, e.g. 13, 19, 165).

We get an especially clear insight into Green’s project from his discussion of what he called “empirical psychology” at §§198 – 200 of the 1874 *Introduction*. Though this passage occurs almost halfway through, its position is important. Green was of course writing an introduction to Hume’s *Treatise*; but he had been discussing Locke and Berkeley through §194. So §195 – 202 is a transitional passage that finally gives a direct story about why Green thought it important to engage with Hume specifically. Green wrote:

The quarrel of the physiologist with the metaphysician is, in fact, due to an *ignorantia elenchi* on the part of the former, for which the behaviour of English ‘metaphysicians,’ in attempting to assimilate their own procedure to that of natural philosophers, and thus to win the popular acceptance which these alone can fairly look for, has afforded too much excuse. The question really at issue is not between two co-ordinate sciences, as if a theory of the human body were claiming also to be a theory of the human soul, and the theory of the soul were resisting the aggression. The question is, whether the conceptions which all the departmental sciences alike presuppose shall have an account given of them or no. For dispensing with such an account altogether (life being short) there is much to be said, if only men would or could dispense with it; but the physiologist, when he claims that his science should supersede metaphysic, is not dispensing with it, but rendering it in a preposterous way. He accounts for the formal conceptions in question, in other words for thought as it is common to all the sciences, as sequent upon the antecedent facts which his science ascertains—the facts of the animal organisation. But these conceptions—the relations of cause and effect, &c.—are necessary to constitute the facts. They are not an *ex post facto* interpretation of them, but an interpretation without which there would be no ascertainable facts at all. (Green 1874/1894, 164-65)

Psychologists pretend to dispense with speculative metaphysics altogether, according to Green, and instead offer their work as a kind of scientific account of scientific knowledge.²⁷ But any would-be science of the sciences²⁸ must leave out an adequate account of the “formal conceptions”—he had in mind the familiar run of Kantian categories, it seems—employed in the sciences. This is because *qua* science, psychology must use the very concepts it pretends to explain. Therefore, psychology can never provide the sort of meta-criticism of scientific knowledge that a priori metaphysics provides, for Green. My purpose here is not to spell out the details of his argument, but rather to draw attention to a crucial goal of Green’s analysis of Locke-Berkeley-and-Hume—namely, to undermine the pretensions of his contemporaries to substitute empirical psychology for metaphysics.

So where are we? Lewes adopted the disparaging phrase “empiricism” to describe his own naturalistic project (in 1874), and we saw Huxley recruiting Hume five years later (but not Locke or Berkeley) as a naturalist pioneer. Meanwhile, Green strung the Locke-Berkeley-Hume triad together (also in 1874) as a way to criticize the historical progression of this naturalist idea, and then directly adapted his criticism to Lewes (and to Herbert Spencer) in a multi-part essay published in 1877 – 1878.²⁹

What role, then, did Green play in the advent of our contemporary concept of empiricism? Unfortunately, there is yet one more difficulty in answering this question. Green never actually

²⁷ This way of understanding empirical psychology is surely influenced by the preface to the *Treatise*, where Hume wrote that he wanted to develop a “natural science of man.” Indeed, Green’s sharpest attack on psychology is entitled “Can There Be a Natural Science of Man?” See (Green 1882a; Green 1882b; Green and Bradley 1882).

²⁸ Clearly, Green is not producing a strawman. Lewes, Huxley, and Titchener really saw psychology as standing to produce (or elicit, in Lewes’s case) a scientific account of fundamental scientific conceptions. It is worth noting that this kind of project is very much alive today in the so-called cognitive science of science literature (e.g., Knobe and Samuels 2013, Thagard et al. 2012).

²⁹ I am simplifying in suggesting that Green’s basis for grouping Locke, Berkeley and Hume together was merely that they shared naturalist philosophical aims. It is more accurate to say that Green saw their philosophies as embodying a “progressive” development of a core metaphysical idea, an idea I have elsewhere called “the reality principle.” According to this principle, we get genuine information about reality through what is passively stamped on our minds in sensation, and we get only fantastical representations when the mind actively manipulates material it first receives from the senses (e.g., Green 1874/1894, 31 – 32, §153). Green argued at length that this principle was self-contradictory. The details need not detain us here, but I have discussed this principle more thoroughly in (Klein 2009, 418 ff.). For our present purposes, it suffices to note that Green relied heavily on the supposed contradictions of this Lockean principle in attacking both Spencer and Lewes’s respective naturalistic projects, for both projects are supposed to rest on this metaphysical principle (see, e.g., Green 1894, I.379, 447).

called anyone an “empiricist,” so far as I can find. The term “empiricism” appeared in the *Introduction*, but far too rarely to serve as any organizing concept—I find only four occurrences in the entire work (Green 1874/1894, §118, §119, §224, §227). Neither “empiricism” nor “empiricist” appears at all in Green’s lengthy discussions of Hobbes, Spencer, Lewes, Mill, or Kant, either. That is, neither word appears in the first two volumes of the *Collected Works* (Green 1894), save for the four mentioned instances in the *Introduction*.

In each of the four instances where Green does use “empiricism,” he uses the word not to associate Berkeley and Hume with Locke, but to associate Locke with untutored philosophical views to which the *common person* subscribes—that is, Green was apparently using the term in its everyday pejorative sense.

What is more, Green clearly did not have the accompanying contrast-concept of “rationalism” in the way we now use it. In fact, despite his criticisms, Green actually praised the “genius of Locke and Hume” by saying they at least followed “the spirit of Rationalism,” which he immediately defined as their “faith that all things may ultimately be understood” (Green 1874/1894, 5, §5). So whatever Green meant in the four cases he characterized Locke as an “empiricist,” it was not a word meant to contrast with his label “Rationalist,” which he also applied to Locke.³⁰

In fact, Green made no attempt to distinguish Locke, Berkeley, and Hume from people we now call “Cartesian Rationalists”, under *any* name. The person, and position, with which Green contrasted Locke-Berkeley-and-Hume is Kant and Kantianism. But Kant does not, on his account, play the role of synthesizer of two traditions. Rather, Green says that Hume “...with full and reasoned articulation asks the question, which the other [Kant] with equal fulness [sic] seeks to answer” (Green 1874/1894, §3, 3). (Green never mentions Descartes in the *Introduction*; he once mentions Spinoza, saying that Hume showed Berkeley to be “a Spinozist” concerning

³⁰ By 1900, the term "empiricism" had spread widely enough that Howard Knox could comfortably use it in the title of an article on Green, writing: “...Green’s refutation of empiricism is found to be, on the face of it, a denial that there can be any such thing as psychology at all” (Knox 1900, 70). Notice the centrality Knox also gives to psychology in his interpretation of Green.

substance (Green 1874/1894, §341, 293); and he mentions Leibniz on two early pages as an influence on Kant (Green 1874/1894, §2-3).)

So Green did not use the rhetoric, at least, of employing “empiricist” and “rationalist” to demarcate people according to their answer to a key epistemological question. This is important because it suggests that at least in 1874, Green did not expect his readers to understand “rationalist” and “empiricist” to characterize either opposed positions in the theory of knowledge or opposed movements in early modern philosophy.

I take myself to have established the following in this section. First, Green used a HiTh concept to manufacture a tradition that was meant to extend all the way from Locke to his contemporary philosophical opponents. As is the case with our contemporary HiTh concept of empiricism, Green’s conception of that tradition is associated with a group of historical philosophers that include Locke, Berkeley and Hume. What distinguishes Green’s concept of empiricism from our own, contemporary version, is what Green thinks ties together these philosophers. On Green’s account, these historical figures successively sought to develop a naturalistic account of mind—or what would become Lewesean naturalism. So, although Green’s conception of the tradition shares some important features with our contemporary HiTh concept of empiricism, the two are not quite the same concept.

6. Historicizing HiTh Concepts?

Recent work on conceptual genealogy has sought to trace the history of concepts that do not themselves have any obvious historical purport. Scholars have offered histories of supposedly timeless concepts like objectivity, truth, and logical form, often with the deflationary aim of showing these concepts to be more contingent and more historically localized than we may think.³¹ But HiTh concepts are interestingly different because they wear a historical purport on their sleeves.

³¹ On objectivity, see (Daston 1992, Daston and Galison 1992, 2007); on truth, see (Williams 2004); on logical form, and for a review and discussion of conceptual genealogy in analytic philosophy more generally, see (Novaes 2016).

Does a history of the sort I have developed here somehow deflate the concept of empiricism? My analysis offers a precise way to formulate and contemplate (but it does not necessitate) a kind of semantic historicism concerning HiTh concepts. The key question is whether one takes the theoretic and the historical parts of HiTh concepts to be intrinsically or extrinsically related.

Those with ahistoricist predilections may be inclined to think of bare epistemological empiricism, or bare Lewesean naturalism, as occupying spaces on a timeless chessboard of possible philosophical positions. This amounts to denying any intrinsic connection between the semantic content of a position like this and any historical narrative philosophers evoke to illustrate it. In other words, semantic ahistoricists hold that we can meaningfully articulate the bare philosophical concept without evoking the work of past philosophers supposed to exemplify said concept.

There are some problems with semantic ahistoricism. For one thing, it sits uncomfortably with the historical overtones HiTh concepts like empiricism plainly evoke in everyday philosophical speech. Indeed, it sits uncomfortably with the historical narratives our 19th-century subjects (like Green, Lewes, and Huxley) themselves rely on in articulating related philosophical issues. Semantic ahistoricism struggles to explain why we routinely—as a matter of fact—attach historical significance to philosophical theses like these at all. Relatedly, ahistoricism struggles to explain why some measure of historical training is widely regarded as essential in philosophy. The semantic ahistoricist can insist that because we can (purportedly) learn the meaning of philosophical concepts without appealing to history, it is simply a mistake to require any measure of historical literacy for philosophy students. That strikes me as implausible at least in that it cuts against centuries of practice when it comes to philosophical training.

On the other hand, one can defend a form of semantic historicism by defending an intrinsic link between epistemological empiricism or Lewesean naturalism, on the one hand, and a relevant historical narrative on the other. What we *mean* today by “epistemological empiricism”

is partly constituted, on this view, by our implicit evocation of a historical tradition conceived in a particular way.

This position helps makes sense of the historical overtones HiTh concepts evoke, and it helps identify a proper role for historical training in philosophy (viz., it is essential for teaching students the very meaning of at least some concepts we use in philosophical deliberation). But semantic historicism faces difficult questions of its own.

For one thing, if the meaning of “empiricism” in Lewes’s mouth is partly constituted by the historical narrative he used that term to evoke, then what basis do we have for identifying Lewes’s concept with our own? We intuitively want to say that Lewes developed an early version of the very concept of empiricism that we use in philosophy today. But we no longer accept his history—for example, we no longer see Comte as the empiricist flag-bearer at all. So what basis has the semantic historicist for calling Lewes’s concept an early version of our own? Presumably, the historicist would offer a genealogical basis for this identification—Green clearly read Lewes, Norman Kemp Smith clearly read Green, and so on down to today. But each step in that chain involves some modification of the historical narrative involved. So if historical narratives partly constitute the meaning of HiTh concepts, then it is hard to explain how Lewes and Green, or Green and Smith can all be talking about the *same* concept of empiricism at all.

Whether we are semantic historicists or ahistoricists ourselves, as *historians* we must keep the complexity of these concepts in view. This is because our historical subjects’ philosophical projects often hinge on HiTh concepts. If we ignore the complexity of these concepts, we risk oversimplifying the mutual interplay between historical interpretation and philosophical theorizing in our *subjects’* work.³²

I close with a passage from Richard Rorty that illustrates this risk. Rorty often claimed that our current understanding of history impacts the way we practice philosophy, ourselves:

³² Whether or not this interplay is *necessary*—that is, whether we see intrinsic or extrinsic connections between the theoretic and the historical parts of HiTh concepts—the interplay is at least a matter of historical fact. Or so I have argued for the case of the HiTh concept of empiricism.

The self-image of a philosopher—his identification of himself as such (rather than as, perhaps, an historian or a mathematician or a poet)—depends almost entirely upon how he sees the history of philosophy. It depends upon which figures he imitates, and which episodes and movements he disregards. So a new account of the history of philosophy is a challenge which cannot be ignored. (Rorty 1982, 41)

I agree that a philosopher's self-image is likely to be *tied up* with a particular way of understanding the history of philosophy. But I don't agree that a philosopher's self-image often simply "depends" on his or her view of history. We don't wait to theorize till we are done doing history. Our philosophical commitments can drive our analysis of history as much as our historical assessments can shape our philosophical commitments.³³

At any rate, if my case study is representative, philosophers often work out their historical analyses (however cursory) and their philosophical commitments together, in tandem. As historians, we must bear in mind that this is as likely to be true of the dead philosophers we study as it is of the living philosophers we are.

³³ I am therefore sympathetic with (Lapointe Forthcoming), who also casts doubt on the idea that purely historical reflection can be pursued in isolation from purely theoretic reflection in philosophy.

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