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**Doing Philosophy as Composing Variations: A Contribution to a Theory of the History of Philosophy in Philosophy Education**

**1. Introduction**

This article discusses the relationship between philosophy teaching (at the pre-university level) and the history of philosophy. The starting point is the educational question of the grounds on which the history of philosophy can or should be incorporated into the philosophy classroom. The central part of the article argues for the metaphilosophical thesis that doing philosophy and the history of philosophy should be seen as two aspects of a structurally unified play of variations. On this view, the history of philosophy is not something that can be brought into the classroom on a supplementary, optional basis, as if it were something external to the subject. Rather, the pupils are drawn into this play of variations, becoming participants in the history of philosophy to the extent that they do philosophy in the classroom. The history of philosophy is consequently unresolved in a double sense: Not only does it – self-evidently – never come to a chronological end or lead to fixed results, but it is also unresolved in the sense of being open, approachable, and accessible.

One of the goals of what follows is to explain the relationship between philosophy teaching and the history of philosophy in a way that works at a more fundamental level than any possible dichotomy between doing philosophy in a “systematic” or “historical” mode. As we will attempt to show, one of the advantages of thinking in terms of variation is that it makes it possible to bring the preexisting relationship between receptivity and productivity in doing philosophy into view. With the help of this approach, in our view, seemingly opposed understandings of what it is to do philosophy can be made intelligible as second-order differences in emphasis.

We will present our metaphilosophical thesis to begin with in relation to doing philosophy in general, and our subsequent conclusions about philosophy teaching will also mostly remain at the level of basic principles. At the same time, we do offer a contribution to a “theory of philosophy education” in the strict sense insofar as 1) the theoretical gap to be filled, 2) the question to be posed as a consequence of this gap, and 3) the criteria a successful theory has to meet all arise out of the scholarship of philosophy education.

**1.1. The Theoretical Gap to Be Filled**

We suppose that the majority of specialists in philosophy education today would agree that the history of philosophy “belongs” in the philosophy classroom in some way. The old dividing line between historical and systematic philosophers, which came repeatedly to the forefront in scholarly debate and academic politics in recent decades and which, for example, continued to play an important role in German-language philosophy education in the Martens-Rehfus debate of the 1980s,[[1]](#footnote-1) appears to have given way for the most part to a pragmatic consensus in current teaching practice at schools and universities.[[2]](#footnote-2) This consensus – to the extent that it actually exists – nevertheless lacks a theoretical and conceptual foundation. For what purpose can and should the history of philosophy be incorporated into the framework of, for example, problem-oriented philosophy instruction? Is such an incorporation merely optional, because it happens to be useful, or is it constitutive? Some implicit answers to these questions can indeed be found in the philosophy education discourse, but there has up to now been scarcely any targeted discussion on a theoretical and conceptual level, going beyond methodological suggestions. However, the 2023 establishment of a working group on “History of Philosophy and Philosophy Education” (“Philosophiegeschichte und -didaktik”) and the organization of a conference on the same subject by the Gesellschaft für Philosophie- und Ethikdidaktik (Society for Philosophy and Ethics Education) in March 2024 show that the relevance of the topic and the existing need for research have meanwhile come to be recognized.

**1.2. The Question**

In order to be able to characterize the relationship between philosophy teaching and the history of philosophy, we need a metaphilosophical reference theory, but in many cases, the scholarly debates (and the academic politics) about the relationship between philosophy and the history of philosophy can only be adapted to our purposes to a limited extent.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is the case, for example, when philosophy is understood in these debates exclusively as the academic, scholarly discipline. Moreover, philosophy education has to be very cautious about taking a position in favour of one or another specific conception of philosophy, something which may be legitimate and appropriate in scholarly debate. Finally, and this is the most important point, the scholarly discipline’s widespread understanding of the history of philosophy as a *history of ideas* is in our view not an appropriate foundation for philosophy education. Briefly put, a history of philosophy that is understood as a *static object* will always ultimately remain a conceptually foreign body within the *dynamic event* of philosophy teaching. For this reason, a reference theory for philosophy education, that is, one that takes the classroom as its starting point, has to be centred on *actually doing philosophy*. As we will see, it makes a difference whether we consider the relationship between the history of philosophy and *philosophy* as an academic and scholarly *discipline* or *doing philosophy* as an *activity*. The following reflections on the relationship between doing philosophy and the history of philosophy are therefore offered from the perspective of *doing philosophy as praxis*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**1.3. The Criteria**

A reference theory about the relationship between philosophy education and the history of philosophy also has to meet a number of criteria drawn from the specific theoretical needs of the discipline of education:

1. It should be based on the weakest possible philosophical prerequisites and should avoid as far as possible privileging particular philosophical currents.
2. Where the classroom is concerned, it should not aim at or imply an unproductive standardization of the “right” way of doing philosophy, the “right” way of incorporating the history of philosophy, or the “right” selection of texts to be read.
3. It should be practical in two senses; that is, it should both prove useful in the retrospective description of what happens in the classroom and provide a helpful reference point for prospective lesson planning.

**1.4. Methodology**

First, we will formulate the problem more precisely through a brief look at Hegel’s philosophy of the history of philosophy (2). Next, we will discuss several examples of current strategies for dealing with this problem (3). Then, in the main part of the article, we will develop our metaphilosophical thesis on the foundation of Jan Assmann’s theory of “cultural memory,” from which we take the idea of doing philosophy as composing variations (4). As the basis for a metaphilosophical reference theory, however, this is only a building block in need of supplementation, so in the subsequent section, we will use Hans Blumenberg’s theory and praxis of the history of philosophy as an example of how it can not only be made more concrete and more easily visualized but also given greater substantive depth (5).

**2. Formulating the Problem More Precisely on the Basis of Hegel’s Theory of the History of Philosophy**

The question about the relationship between doing philosophy and the history of philosophy, as we will now make clear, points to a more fundamental question, whether we should see the two as a *duality* that has to somehow be brought together into a unified whole or as a preexisting *unity* within which we simply distinguish two (always interconnected) aspects. We will illustrate this by looking at Hegel’s theory of the history of philosophy:[[5]](#footnote-5) On the one hand, he postulates that historical and systematic ways of doing philosophy are unified in their results. On the other hand, he draws what appears to be an almost uncrossable border between them on the philosophical map, traces of which can still be found in philosophy and philosophy education today.[[6]](#footnote-6)

As is well known, Hegel sees the history of philosophy as far more than a component of the knowledge to be attained by a well-educated, cultivated person; rather, for him, engagement with this history is itself philosophy in the emphatic sense of “scholarship.” In Hegel’s words, the „Studium der Geschichte der Philosophie“ is the „Studium der Philosophie selbst“ (Hegel 1971: 49). And again:

Diese Erkenntnisse sind eben […] nicht eine Gelehrsamkeit, die Kenntnis des Verstorbenen, Begrabenen und Verwesten; die Geschichte der Philosophie hat es mit dem nicht Alternden, gegenwärtig Lebendigen zu tun. (Hegel 1971: 58)

Hegel thus categorically granted a title of nobility to engagement with the history of philosophy as a genuinely philosophical activity. At the same time, on the other hand, he introduced a strict bifurcation between two „Erscheinungsweisen“ of philosophy, distinguishing between philosophy’s manifestation „als Zeitfolge der Geschichte“ and its manifestation as „Aufeinanderfolge in der logischen Ableitung der Begriffe“ (Hegel 1971: 49). This second manifestation of philosophy, as “unhistorical,” systematic, constructive reflection of the kind Hegel himself claimed to pursue in the *Science of Logic*, is not only substantively autonomous from the study of philosophy „als Zeitfolge der Geschichte“ (ibid.) in his view. For Hegel, systematic study is also chronologically prior to the historical study of philosophy within a possible subjective philosophical process of cognition. Both conclusions follow from the fact that in order to study the history of philosophy, we have to „schon mitbringen“ the „Erkenntnis der Idee“, as Hegel says (Hegel 1971: 49).[[7]](#footnote-7) It is also clear, as a result, that for Hegel, the active and productive moment of doing philosophy is primarily found on the side of philosophy as a logical discipline, while the study of the history of philosophy, even if it has the advantage for teaching of sometimes offering an attractive „Schauspiels“ (Hegel 1971: 48), is in the last analysis, from the perspective of someone who has gone through it, merely something that the person doing philosophy has to *retrace*. A further consequence of this bifurcation is that Hegel also tends to oppose reviving and updating philosophical models from earlier ages. For example, he says about studying earlier, especially ancient philosophy for the purpose of reviving it:

Es ist nur bis zu einem gewissen Grade Befriedigung darin zu finden. Man muß wissen, was man in den alten Philosophen oder in der Philosophie jeder anderen bestimmten Zeit zu suchen hat, oder wenigstens wissen, daß man in solcher Philosophie eine bestimmte Entwicklungsstufe des Denkens vor sich hat und in ihr nur diejenigen Formen und Bedürfnisse des Geistes zum Bewußtsein gebracht sind, welche innerhalb der Grenzen einer solchen Stufe liegen. In dem Geiste der neueren Zeit schlummern tiefere Ideen, die, um sich wach zu wissen, einer anderen Umgebung und Gegenwart bedürften als jene abstrakten, unklaren, grauen Gedanken der alten Zeit. (Hegel 1971: 67f.)

Clearly, Hegel does affirm the substantive unity of the history of philosophy and systematic philosophy (and tries to demonstrate it in his lectures on the history of philosophy), but he also undertakes a thoroughgoing bifurcation in his philosophical praxis (and related theory).

A theory of the philosophy of history from the perspective of philosophy education cannot adopt Hegel’s assumption that these two ways of doing philosophy, divided in practice, coincide *in their results* as a consequence of the unity of reason: Not only is the necessary prerequisite of a teleological course of the history of philosophy too strong a metaphysical framework assumption. In addition, the assumption of a linear course of history is likely to lead to an educationally unproductive standardization and hierarchization among the various different styles of doing philosophy. Due consideration of the empirical multiplicity of voices in the history of philosophy outside of canonical “turning points in philosophical development”[[8]](#footnote-8) will also scarcely be possible on such a basis.

In this state of the problem, in which we have “inherited” from Hegel the practical bifurcation of ways of doing philosophy without being able, like Hegel, to metaphysically reconcile both sides in the end, there appear to be three options:

(1) We give up the assertion of the unity of philosophy that Hegel articulated (understood here as the unity of doing philosophy and engaging with the history of philosophy) and accept the duality of the two ways of proceeding as fundamental and unbridgeable.

(2) We maintain this assertion and this thoroughgoing practical bifurcation and look for another basis on which to establish the unity of philosophy.

(3) We maintain the assertion of the unity of philosophy and give up the conviction that the practical bifurcation of philosophy into two ways of proceeding is fundamental and justified.

These three options allow us to classify possible answers to the question about the basis for incorporating the history of philosophy into the philosophy classroom from a systematic perspective. We will next consider three conceivable strategies for establishing such a basis that can be classified under options 1 and 2, after which we will argue for the choice of option 3.

**3. Three Possible Strategies from Philosophy Education[[9]](#footnote-9)**

**3.1. Secondary Goals of Philosophy Teaching**

An answer in accordance with this strategy might go something like this: “It is true that knowing the history of philosophy is not absolutely useful or required in order to do philosophy, but acquiring a philosophical education traditionally includes more than the sheer ability to do philosophy.” A look at examination practices at schools and universities and the importance that was long ascribed to knowing the history of philosophy in those exams suggests that such an argument, framed in terms of theories about what it means to be a well-educated person, is at least not an obviously mistaken one. In terms of the classification outlined above, it clearly belongs under the resigned option 1: We make no attempt to consider doing philosophy and knowing the history of philosophy from a single conceptual and educational perspective, and we assign two independent goals to philosophy instruction: teaching how to do philosophy and transmitting a particular body of knowledge seen as culturally significant. The extent to which these two goals can be pursued together or only separately in practice will ultimately remain an incidental consideration under this set of assumptions.

**3.2. Usefulness Arguments**

By nature, strategies that emphasize the usefulness of knowing the history of philosophy take an *accumulative* approach: “Knowing the history of philosophy can be helpful for doing philosophy in many ways. We are able to better locate particular philosophical positions in their historical context and so to understand them better; we know and understand the historical background of current debates; we learn from great philosophical models how to formulate precise and exact arguments.” These and many other conceivable usefulness arguments can be reduced for simplicity’s sake to this claim: knowing the history of philosophy contributes to *improving* the ability to do philosophy. Scarcely anyone is likely to seriously dispute this claim. Nevertheless, there are reasons against basing the explanation of why the history of philosophy “belongs” with doing philosophy exclusively or even mainly on usefulness arguments. In terms of the classification outlined above, this strategy falls between options 1 and 2: If knowing the history of philosophy is not required for doing philosophy but merely useful, the practical bifurcation of philosophy is acknowledged as a matter of principle. However, usefulness in itself, as a positive characterization of the relationship between knowing the history of philosophy and doing philosophy, scarcely provides a stable bridge toward solving the problem of the unity of philosophy along the lines of option 2. Because every conceivable usefulness argument has to consider whether the desired usefulness might be obtained in some other way, and possibly in a more targeted or efficient one,[[10]](#footnote-10) usefulness arguments always remain subject to well-founded doubts about their validity. In the worst case, a string of such arguments might even come across as a rhetorical evasive manoeuvre aimed at covering up the lack of a sound foundation.

**3.3. Eternalism**

The characterization of this strategy as eternalism is taken from a presentation by Manuel Lorenz.[[11]](#footnote-11) Briefly summarized, eternalism sees philosophy as a discipline that concerns itself with timelessly relevant problems arising from determinate, unchangeable, anthropological basic structures.[[12]](#footnote-12) In terms of the classification outlined above, eternalism appears to choose option 2: The practical division between doing philosophy and its relationship to the history of philosophy is acknowledged as a matter of principle, but at the same time, an explanation for the unity of philosophy is offered: “We who do philosophy today and the philosophers of earlier times concern ourselves with *the same problems*.”

For philosophy educators, eternalism appears at first to offer an attractive option for several reasons: It appears to provide an elegant conceptual bridge over the dividing line between doing philosophy and the history of philosophy. In addition, it is in perfect harmony with the educational principle of problem-oriented instruction: the arguments of earlier philosophers can be organically integrated into the instructional process as a way of “asking questions of experts” (Ekkehard Martens). Rolf Sistermann’s “bonbon model,” still frequently used in German universities and teacher-preparation programs even as it has come under criticism, also appears to implicitly assume eternalism as its reference theory.[[13]](#footnote-13)

We will not discuss here whether eternalism can be philosophically justified or not. According to the criteria formulated above, however, it is unsuitable as a reference theory for philosophy education. First of all, the assumption of a timeless set of problems addressed by philosophy once again requires too strong a set of philosophical framework assumptions, because even if philosophers in different eras deal with the same subject matter, this does not mean that they address the same problems. In addition, the assumption of a timeless set of problems addressed by philosophy implies the assumption of a timeless “essential core” of philosophy as a discipline concerned with these problems. Like Hegel’s teleology, therefore, eternalism is faced with the problem of lacking an adequate way to give due consideration to the empirical multiplicity of the ways in which doing philosophy is practiced. The assumption of a timeless essential core of doing philosophy further threatens, if it is spelled out, to lead to a substantively inadequate and practically unproductive standardization of doing philosophy.

Finally, engagement with the history of philosophy also remains merely useful for eternalism, not constitutive: When we do philosophy, we can bring in positions from the history of philosophy – but we do not have to. The mentioned weaknesses of pure usefulness arguments consequently also apply to eternalism: It may enable a better explanation of why engagement with the history of philosophy could be useful for doing philosophy, but the conceptual dividing line between the two ways of proceeding in doing philosophy nevertheless remains in place in this strategy as well.

**4. Doing Philosophy as Composing Variations: Jan Assmann’s Theory of Cultural Memory and the Philosophy Classroom[[14]](#footnote-14)**

**4.1. Variational Reference to the Past and the History of Philosophy in Assmann**

We would now like to present a strategy that chooses option 3, that is, one that maintains the assertion of the unity of philosophy but also, unlike the approaches just discussed, seeks to unpack this assertion by giving up the practical dividing line that Hegel drew between the systematic doing of philosophy and engagement with the history of philosophy and instead taking the *unity of the two in the practice of doing philosophy* as its starting point. Our thesis is this: doing philosophy (or teaching philosophy) and the history of philosophy are to be seen as two aspects of a unified play of variations. As previously mentioned, we take the concept of variation from Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural memory.

In his book *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, which first appeared in German in 1992, Assmann studies “writing, remembrance, and political imagination” (in the words of the subtitle) in early societies. In the final chapter, “Greece and Disciplined Thinking,” he puts forward the thesis that in Greece between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, a way of engaging with earlier texts developed that was significantly different from forms of reference to the past that can be found in other early civilizations. As this new type of reference became increasingly established, it was what first led to the emergence of philosophy as a discipline, according to Assmann, and has remained a fundamental structure of the history of philosophy ever since.[[15]](#footnote-15) The starting point for Assmann’s argument is the thesis, first articulated by E. A. Havelock in his 1963 *Preface to Plato* and most familiar in Germany in its adaptation by Niklas Luhmann, according to which the truly explosive development of Greek culture between the sixth and the fourth centuries, including the emergence of philosophy along with it, can be traced to the particular characteristics of the medium of Greek alphabetic writing.[[16]](#footnote-16) Assmann modifies this thesis in a central point: what was decisive in his view was not the medium of alphabetic writing as such, which was only one of several prerequisites, but its cultural embedding, that is, the *use* made of this medium in Greek culture.[[17]](#footnote-17) In order to more precisely characterize specifically philosophical engagement with earlier texts, which he believes gradually led to “disciplined thinking,” Assmann first distinguishes it from two other forms of reference to the past that he has previously identified as characteristic of other early civilizations, reference to texts as “canonical” and as “classical”:

Wer Platon und Aristoteles ‚Klassiker‘ nennt, betont ihre unerreichbare Vorbildlichkeit. Ihre Schriften haben die Maßstäbe dafür gesetzt, was Philosophieren bedeutet […]. Wer diese Schriften ‚kanonisch‘ nennt, betont ihre absolute Autorität. […] Daß beide Formen des Rückbezugs dem Wesen des philosophischen Umgangs mit Texten nicht ganz gerecht zu werden vermögen, liegt auf der Hand. Hier handelt es sich um eine dritte Form des Rückbezugs, die man von Klassik und Kanon scharf unterscheiden muß, auch wenn sich Querverbindungen herstellen lassen. (Assmann 2018: 285).

Assmann calls his own attempt at characterizing this „dritten Form des Rückbezugs“ „Hypolepse“ (Assmann 2018: 281). What he understands by this is linking up with something said in a text as if it were something said by a previous speaker, not just by repeating what was previously said but through „progressiver Variation“ (Assmann 2018: 281f.).

This kind of variational linkage to something written as if it were something said by a previous speaks rests on (at least) three prerequisites, according to Assmann: first, the medium of *writing*, without which it would simply not be possible to make reference to something previously said as a position open to criticism (for which reason it would be impossible for a discipline of “philosophy” to emerge in primarily oral cultures); second, the possibility of a *reference to truth or to the subject matter*; and third, a *framework* that manages possible forms of reference and provides criteria for deciding questions of truth. Where the reference to truth or to the subject matter is concerned, Assmann argues that its appearance in the train of “disciplined thinking” in ancient Greece was also linked to specific historical and cultural prerequisites. On the one hand, there was the “experience of difference” provoked by the use of the medium of writing, which first brought about a separation between *information* (the truth of which is not subject to question) and *communication* (the truth of which must first be investigated). On the other hand, reference to truth or to the subject matter also presupposes the absence of (secular or religious) authorities who establish particular texts as ultimate sources of truth. This can be described in positive terms as a certain *openness* of the discursive space, present in Greek culture to a higher degree than in cultures that were, for example, marked by the influence of revealed religious texts defined as canonical. Finally, Assmann draws attention with his prerequisite of a *framework* to the fact that linking up with something said in a text as if it were something said by a previous speaker is based on a complex performance of discourse organisation. An earlier author thought and wrote *in* their situation and *for* their situation. If I am now going to make critical reference to what they said in relation to questions of truth, what they said has to be

als die sprachliche Komponente eines komplexen Interaktionsgeschehens aus seinem konkreten situativen Rahmen ausgebettet und als Text verselbständigt werden […], um die Interaktionssituation überdauern und späteren Wiederaufnahmen zugänglich werden zu können. Mit solcher Ausbettung würde aber der Sinn des Gesagten verlorengehen, würde nicht zugleich auch die Situation als solche „gedehnt“, d.h. ein neuer situativer Rahmen geschaffen werden, der sowohl die Akte der Überlieferung des Gesagten als auch die Akte der hypoleptischen Anknüpfung ans Gesagte steuert und organisiert. Der ausgebettete, „situationsabstrakt“ gewordene und sozusagen schutzlos jedem Mißverständnis und jeder Ablehnung ausgelieferte Text bedarf eines neuen Rahmens, der diesen Verlust an situativer Determination kompensiert.“ (Assmann 2018: 284).

In the contemporary context, philosophy teaching at both the pre-university and university levels, along with scholarly journals, conferences, and the like, can be ascribed the function of a framework of this kind, one that makes the texts that have been handed down readable and interpretable in a particular way in the first place, by “extending” the communicative situation in such a way that what was said by the previous speaker may have been said more than two thousand years ago, and by providing criteria, that is, rules of discourse governing both possible forms of reference to the past and “truth testing.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Assmann does not reduce the hypoleptic reference enabled by such a framework to (literary) intertextuality or absolutize it along the lines of a one-sided fixation on the receptive reworking of earlier texts. Rather, in his view, every philosophical praxis that on occasion finds expression in the production of texts exists

in einem dreifachen Bezug: 1. in bezug auf frühere Texte, 2. in bezug auf die Sache, und 3. in bezug auf Kriterien, anhand deren sich der Wahrheitsanspruch des Textes und die Differenz zwischen Mitteilung und Information kontrollieren lässt. (Assmann 2018: 287)

Assmann thus argues that the exploitation of the possibility of making reference to earlier texts was constitutively important for the historical emergence of philosophy in ancient Greece. At the same time, however, he also considers this form of reference to be a fundamental structure of the history of philosophy that persists unchanged, even if its realisation depends on complex prerequisites. In the next section, we will show that the concept of variation can in fact be used to formulate an understanding of the history of philosophy that avoids a bifurcation of what it is to do philosophy.

**4.2. History of Philosophy and Doing Philosophy as a Unified Play of Variations**

Variations are, like repetitions, actions. If we talk about the history of philosophy as a history of variations, then, it is less a matter of a history of ideas and thoughts than of a history of actions (Hegel 1971: 38: „Taten der Geschichte der Philosophie“). An understanding of doing philosophy as composing variations thus not only takes into account the primacy of the praxis of doing philosophy but also considers the history of philosophy as a play of variations from the perspective of praxis.

More precisely, ‘variation’ can refer either to an action or to the result of this action. This act-object ambiguity makes the concept of variation also suitable for the classification of textual productions. Nevertheless, it is clear from what we have said that primacy has to be given to the production aspect: Every philosophical text is the expression of a philosophical praxis, and every text is intended to be received in the course of this praxis. The concept of variation therefore makes it possible to undertake a description of philosophy that makes reference both to doing philosophy as a praxis and to philosophical texts as fixed results and permanent points of reference for such a praxis.

In terms of content, variations are characterized by the fact that, unlike repetitions, they include elements of continuity and change. In this regard as well, it appears that the broad spectrum of ways that philosophical activity links up with what has come before (for example, continuing, reformulating, building on, critiquing, rejecting, overcoming, deconstructing . . .) can be described in general terms and in its basic structure using the concept of variation:

At the core of the historicity of philosophy is the reciprocal interplay between change and continuity. On the one hand, a hermeneutical linkage to the tradition includes changes, solutions, and redescriptions; on the other hand, new interpretations and reformulations also take their place in a continuity that is singularly distinctive of philosophical discourse. (Angehrn 1999: 1140)

The concept of variation may therefore make it possible to overcome the conceptual dividing line that Hegel’s philosophy drew between the history of philosophy and the contemporary doing of philosophy: If we describe philosophy as a structurally unified play of variations, then the texts to which we make reference in the course of composing variations appear themselves as variations, that is, (interim) results of a philosophical praxis that makes reference to texts and proceeds by composing variations. Every act of variational linkage is additionally aimed at future acts of variational linkage – the monograph just as much as the oral contribution to a discussion. Whether a philosophical praxis of variation itself aims at the transsituational permanence of its results or leaves this possibility open consequently matters very little for the question of whether it participates in this play of variations at the fundamental level. From this perspective, then, the history of philosophy no longer appears as an external object of knowledge or a kind of shuttered treasury on which one can draw when occasion demands. The corpus of theories found in the library is only part of the history of philosophy, understood as a play of variations, to the extent that links are made to it and variations built on it. Any transsituational fixation in a given medium also remains historically internal and finite, reliant on the conservation, reproduction, and transfer of the medium in question, its cataloguing, systematizing, and accessibility, or in brief, on the active promotion of its transmission and on “framing” institutions. The texts that we consider to belong to the history of philosophy hence do not form a firm pedestal on which we can build. What is foundational is far more the cultural, which is to say also the philosophical, *use* that is made (or could be made) of these texts and out of which the need for fixation and transmission arises in the first place.

**4.3. History of Philosophy and Philosophy Teaching**

Having established this foundation, we are now able to show that even the pre-university philosophy classroom has a constitutive relationship to texts from the history of philosophy. If we refrain from assuming a timeless essential core of doing philosophy (unlike eternalism, for example), we must also see the forms of praxis through which philosophy teaching takes place as variations of existing forms of praxis of doing philosophy. This means that we are dealing with variations not only when in the course of doing philosophy we link up with a particular statement, thesis, position, argument, or theory, but also when the act of doing philosophy is accompanied and shaped by a specific understanding of what it means to do philosophy. To say, for example, that “a philosopher is not someone who stands in a particular line of transmission but someone who poses particular substantive questions” (Tugendhat 2006: 166) is to link up with a specific way, one that has been handed down, of understanding and pursuing philosophy as the posing of substantive questions. In fact, doing philosophy does not mean *standing* in a particular line of transmission, but it does mean *linking up* with a particular line of transmission while composing variations, thereby actively *positioning* oneself within the history of philosophy. It needs to be kept firmly in mind, therefore, that not only does variation take place *within* a framework that governs the forms of discursive reference and the discovery of truth, but also *the shaping of the framework itself*, insofar as it is not a matter of unavoidable environmental conditions, *is a variation* from the perspective of a particular understanding of doing philosophy.

In the context of philosophy education, one example of this type of variation, not in the content of doing philosophy but in its form of praxis, is the “educational transformation” of philosophical “lines of thought” into methods of doing philosophy called for by Johannes Rohbeck (Rohbeck 2016). What Rohbeck urges teachers to pursue is nothing other than the conscious production of variations of given philosophical forms of praxis. Ultimately, however, this kind of “methodological” variation also takes place where it is not consciously pursued. In order to be able to speak of such a variation, it is enough, as we have said, that the act of doing philosophy is accompanied and shaped by a specific understanding of what it means to do philosophy. In order to be able to speak about doing philosophy as composing variations, therefore, it is not necessary that the variational character of their own act of doing philosophy is transparent to the persons doing philosophy themselves.

This also makes it clear that in considering the importance of the history of philosophy in the philosophy classroom, we cannot limit ourselves to what is explicitly characterized or made visible for pupils and observers as a reference to the past or individually engaged in as such through the reading of texts. It is precisely variational linkage not only to given philosophical positions but also to forms of praxis that is in view here. It is to a certain extent provided by the “framework,” especially as this framework is prescribed by preexisting institutional factors (curricula, government regulations, textbooks, examination requirements, educational traditions, etc.). In the end, however, the decisive factor is the teacher, who has to actualize this framework in the classroom, make it concrete, and fill it with life. Mediated by the teacher’s lesson planning[[19]](#footnote-19) and by the way in which the teacher – variationally linking up with given philosophical forms of praxis – conducts the lesson, the history of philosophy thereby enters into *every classroom situation* – even when it is entirely invisible to the pupils doing philosophy.[[20]](#footnote-20) If we claim that philosophy should happen in the philosophy classroom, then as a consequence of what we have just said, reference to earlier acts of doing philosophy is an essential part of that, to put it briefly. It also follows from what we have said, however, that philosophy teaching and the history of philosophy are not just two structurally analogous plays of variation but *one and the same*.

**4.4. Open Questions**

Another reason that Assmann’s theory is of interest for philosophy education is that it does not claim to offer an independent philosophical proposal within the discourse field of the philosophy of the history of philosophy and is also not primarily interested in philosophical content and ideas but is instead dedicated, as a descriptive and reconstructive theory in the field of cultural studies, to philosophy as a historically developed cultural *form of praxis*. It consequently has the advantage, compared to genuinely philosophical theoretical approaches, that it operates with weaker philosophical framework assumptions than, for example, Hegel or eternalism do.

The price for this, however, is that what doing philosophy consists of is still underdetermined by the concept of variation, and it remains so even if, like Assmann, we take the reference to truth or to the subject matter as constitutive of philosophy, along with the reference to a previous speaker. On a closer look, it also appears that with his concept of progressive variation, which he explains as an advance toward a truth that is „immer nur annäherungsweise“ attainable, Assmann implicitly continues to uphold the paradigm of continuous forward movement toward a transcendental and superhistorical ultimate goal, even if that goal is as such unknowable.[[21]](#footnote-21) An understanding of doing philosophy as composing variations should indeed be capable of *being made concrete* in the form of a teleological conception of the history of philosophy, but it should not itself presuppose such a conception.

In order to address this underdetermination, we will now turn to Hans Blumenberg’s philosophy of history, which offers a concrete example (as one possibility among others) of what Assmann as a cultural historian diagnoses in general terms. Our aim is not, we wish to emphasize, to recommend Blumenberg’s philosophy of history as *the* reference theory for philosophy education. All the same, Blumenberg’s reflections on the history of philosophy and his own way of doing philosophy are an especially suitable reference for our purposes for three reasons. *First*, a Blumenberg-inspired model of variation enables us to avoid falling back into a model of history as continual progress, without becoming trapped on the other hand in a relativistic view of history (or the history of philosophy) as an endless series of entirely arbitrary variations that lack foundation, goal, and any truly philosophical standard of quality. *Second*, Blumenberg engages in metaphilosophical reflection on the variational structure of the history of philosophy and develops it in his research in a way that makes a striking impression on the reader. *Third*, and not least, his own activity of doing philosophy can therefore serve as an especially suggestive example of the unity of doing philosophy and the history of philosophy.

***5*. Doing Philosophy as Composing Variations in Blumenberg**

**5. 1. Blumenberg’s Critique of an Idealist Model of History and His Own Approach**

Blumenberg’s own approach is developed in critical engagement with Edmund Husserl’s philosophy of history. With an Enlightenment style and an idealist model of history not dissimilar to Hegel’s, Husserl responded to the modern age’s increasingly pressing recognition of the contingency of history and its own historicity by emphatic resort to a timelessly valid meaning prescribed by reason, as well as by resort to the caprices of individual philosophers, whose task it is to realize this primordially preexisting unified meaning of reason.[[22]](#footnote-22) Blumenberg’s concern in his phenomenology of history, on the other hand, is first of all to understand the *historicity of history* – that is, to understand how the historical comes to appear in the first place, how it can be made perceptible and understandable as historical.[[23]](#footnote-23) Consequently, he also tries to uncover the more general structures that characterize the historicity of history through the description and intensive study of material details from the history of philosophy. Blumenberg does not ascribe to the history of philosophy a timeless meaning in the idealist mode, one that – as in Hegel – necessarily determines or – as in Husserl – should intentionally determine its empirical course, but instead directs his attention to the complex relationship between *continuity and change* that characterizes the material course of history on closer examination.

One of Blumenberg’s suggestions for conceptualizing the course of the history of philosophy and its changes across time is to think of it in terms of a *question-and-answer scheme*.[[24]](#footnote-24) He starts from the assumption that the historical textual documents produced by the history of philosophy contain possible answers to more fundamental questions and problems.[[25]](#footnote-25) The underlying questions, it is true, are not always explicitly formulated as such in the textual witnesses; instead, the historian of philosophy must often be the one to pose the problem of which question a particular textual witness is answering in the first place, what exactly it is or was that should really have been understood at the time. It is also characteristic of these fundamental questions that they are not in themselves necessarily specific to a particular age. They do not have to persist across historical eras, but they may do so, passed down from earlier ages to subsequent ones, and they may also be relatively constant questions that have occupied human beings almost from the beginning and that need to be posed over and over in similar terms.[[26]](#footnote-26) What changes across time, according to Blumenberg’s work, is therefore not necessarily the questions and problems that we pose to ourselves – although these are also essentially historical. Rather, what fundamentally changes from one historical period to another is the “background,” that is, the frame of reference or the horizon of meaning against which these questions are posed. As in Assmann, then, we find ourselves confronted in Blumenberg with his emphasis on the importance of the framework within which every act of doing philosophy takes place and that – itself a historical phenomenon – contributes to deciding what can be thought and what not, what is considered meaningful or true and what not. In a particular time, in view of a particular frame of reference, particular answers appear possible, meaningful, and functional, while other, earlier answers appear not (any longer) suitable, in need of correction, or even absurd, making it necessary to generate new answers.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The question now is how this process of change in the history of ideas, in the course of which particular answers (and sometimes also particular questions) become obsolete and new ones arise, can be described in precise terms, and what form it concretely takes in the history of philosophy and its individual productions, or in other words, how it is manifested and can be demonstrated. Blumenberg himself introduces the term “reoccupation” in order to describe this process more precisely:[[28]](#footnote-28)

>Umbesetzung< [bedeutet], daß differente Aussagen als Antworten auf identische Fragen verstanden werden können.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The concept of reoccupation points in two directions, as this brief formulation already suggests. On the one hand, it points to possibly identical questions that may form a line of continuity in history. On this, we quote Blumenberg once again:

Der Begriff der >Umbesetzung< bezeichnet implikativ das Minimum an Identität, das noch in der bewegtesten Bewegung der Geschichte muß aufgefunden oder zumindest vorausgesetzt und gesucht werden können.[[30]](#footnote-30)

On the other hand, however, and this is important, the term “reoccupation” also points to the places left empty in a particular conceptual constellation or repertoire of motifs, places that have to be refilled in view of historically changing knowledge, needs, and expectations. As Blumenberg shows in his detailed textual studies, quite concrete, textually demonstrable expansions, deletions, and new contextualisations of the historically available material take place within the framework of each such process.[[31]](#footnote-31) Against the background of changed horizons of understanding and need, particular motifs, concepts, metaphors, myths, and anecdotes from the history of philosophy are taken up, overwritten, altered, and newly reworked. Or, in other words, reoccupation turns out to be a play of variations, as it was generally characterized above with reference to Assmann. As we will see still more clearly in an example below, not only can reoccupation be identified as a play of variations, but the textual witnesses produced by this play of variations, to the extent that they make reference to preexisting material, can also be described as variations of prior variations.

**5.2. Hermeneutical Implications of Blumenberg’s Philosophy of the Historicity of History**

Blumenberg’s approach to the philosophy of history, just sketched, has significant hermeneutical implications that are of interest in our context. We will draw explicit attention to four of them here.

1. Blumenberg’s radicalization of the historical understanding of philosophy, which also historicizes the meaning and the evaluative standards that can be applied to the history of philosophy, leads to a pluralistic understanding of philosophy. This forbids us from interpreting the past, for example, only from the perspective of a presumed timeless meaning or of today’s questions. The history of philosophy as a whole and the particular horizons of meaning within which we move exceed our grasp. As a play of variations continually open to further reoccupations, philosophy is just as pluralistic as the multiplicity of approaches and variations it has produced or (still) could produce.[[32]](#footnote-32)

2. Against this background, textual witnesses from the history of philosophy are not read merely as documents of a history (of development) that extends beyond them, in which they may represent from today’s perspective interim results that have since been surpassed. Rather, the history of philosophy is nothing other than the expression of the play of variations that has historically occurred.

3. In the service of understanding history, Blumenberg is ultimately concerned, also and above all, with uncovering an era’s horizon of meaning, that is, the available *latitude for thought*, which conditions the possibility, the significance, and also the empirical influence of the texts.[[33]](#footnote-33)

4. This uncovering of the texts’ historical background, which cannot be articulated by the texts’ contemporaries because it is self-evident, demands from the historian of philosophy not only historical knowledge and analytical precision but also, it must be noted, speculative abilities. In order to uncover the various possible interpretations of a historical textual witness, “cautious variation,” as Jürgen Goldstein says, is needed in order to exhaust the range of possibilities.[[34]](#footnote-34)

5. The activities that a productive engagement with the philosophy of history requires make clear that a hermeneutics of this kind does not stop at a purely historical and philological engagement with past writings but rather demands an active, living, engaged way of dealing with what is said in the texts, one that is itself doing philosophy. It is ultimately the recipient who rediscovers or (re-)formulates the implicit philosophical problems that the historical texts answer and who works out the arrangement of the historically given answers and further possible answers. As we will see still more emphatically in the example of praxis to which we turn in the next section, the historian of philosophy enters into the historical philosophical process through their activities and, stimulated by and in interaction with the history of philosophy, becomes a person doing philosophy.

**5.3. Example: A Socrates Notecard**

Many of Blumenberg’s longer and shorter works, in which he sets out a historical reoccupation or variation and at the same time himself implements the process of philosophical variation, could be used to illustrate his concrete procedure.[[35]](#footnote-35) Here, however, we will consider one of Blumenberg’s notecards, found in card index no. 24, along with other notecards on Socrates, in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marburg (DLA). The notecard contains variants from the history of philosophy of the formula put in Socrates’s mouth, “I know that I know nothing.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

Socrates – variants of his formula.

Socrates: I know that I know nothing.

Nicholas of Cusa: I know by this that I know nothing (by the fact that I know why I cannot know anything).

Freud: I do not know that I know (e.g., Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, 81).

Ideal of epistemological theory: I know that I know, because I know how I know.

Dogmatic scepticism: I know that I cannot know anything.

Pyrrhonian scepticism: I do not even know whether I can know.

Kant: I know what I cannot know, because for what I can know, I know how I can know it.

God: I know that I know everything, but I do not know that I know this.[[37]](#footnote-37)

An analysis of Blumenberg’s variation of the Socratic formula, presented here as an example, including the way of proceeding that underlies it, allows us to identify several distinguishing features that could also be considered as ideal-typical characteristics of doing philosophy as composing variations henceforward:

1. Blumenberg’s collection and refinement of different variations of the Socratic formula from the history of philosophy is not simply a list of positions and developments from the history of ideas, motivated by purely historical interests, but proves to also be at its core a constructive engagement with various historically produced possible answers to a philosophical question, in this case the question “What do I know?” It is this question that invites, if not requires, a variational approach to the historical material. Thus, for example, Immanuel Kant in his appearance as a previous speaker does not answer exactly the question that he himself posed in his own time, “What can I know?,” but instead the authorial question that implicitly underlies the list, “What do I know?” At this point, the historian of philosophy Blumenberg, who is concerned to shed light on the past’s own problems, gives way to the philosopher Blumenberg, who as a composer of variations practices a creative engagement with the history of philosophy, one that is also fully motivated by his own questions.
2. The initial appearance of Blumenberg’s series of illustrious male philosophers notwithstanding, this list of possible answers from history is not a necessary or complete one, not a *canonical* one, but rather one that its variational composer put together provisionally and as the occasion required. It would be easy, it seems, to add further possible answers or delete some. In this particular example, the composer even goes so far in his (ironic?) highhandedness as to expand the hypoleptic horizon as far as God – a fiction that suddenly pops up here as a “previous speaker” in the philosophical discourse. This kind of maximal openness with regard to who is a suitable previous speaker is evidently contrary to canonical prescriptions and enables in any event a creative, constructive, even experimental handling of other (past) ways of thought.
3. Finally, the example makes clear what the significance of (knowledge of) the history of philosophy for doing philosophy is. In particular, we can note three aspects here: a) Individual answers acquire their specific substantive profile through comparison with and differences from other variants and become transparent in their own significance as one possibility among others. The more one knows about the history of philosophy, the wider and freer becomes one’s space for variation or latitude for thought in one’s own activity of doing philosophy. b) Variational recourse to the history of philosophy gives due consideration to textual witnesses from the history of philosophy through a differentiated engagement with them as they have value in themselves. At the same time, however, it is critical and creative, to the extent that it recognizes that they are products of their time and constantly susceptible to revision and correction and to the extent that it is ultimately able to bring other, new possible answers into consideration or even to produce them itself. Finally, c) within the framework of a hermeneutics of this kind, the person who engages with the history of philosophy is not someone who tells a story of the past from outside, evaluating it after the fact on the basis of the teller’s present-day standards, but rather someone who through the variational adoption of past ideas constructively participates in continuing to write the history of philosophy as a history of variation and in producing its continuity. The philosophical play of variations is hence also a praxis that is carried out by a free, active subject driven by their own philosophical motives. The relationship between (the history of) philosophy and the person doing philosophy is neither that between an authority and its passive reception nor conversely that between a subject and a history subordinate to that subject; instead, the history of philosophy and a subject’s or community’s praxis of doing philosophy are the results of a single philosophical process of variation.

In summary, we find variation in Blumenberg in three senses, in view of his conception of the philosophy of history and his hermeneutical approach to historical documents in the fields of cultural and intellectual history: 1. Variation may refer to the form that reoccupation takes from one era to another. 2. Variation is also the appropriate label for the products or results of these reoccupations as expressed in historical textual documents, in which concretely determined themes, concepts, motifs, and metaphors make their appearance as having undergone variation. 3. Finally, variation also describes the way of proceeding of a historian of philosophy or a person doing philosophy and their way of making reference to past variations.

For Blumenberg, as should be clear by now, there is no standard of measurement external to history (or the history of variation) or applicable to the past after the fact, such that we could make a final judgment about history as a whole and its individual productions. Because there is nothing outside history, it seems that it is ultimately no one other than history itself who judges the importance of its productions. Whether a particular philosophical variation is considered “good” or “successful” can therefore only emerge out of the discursive play of variations itself (and may perhaps change in the process of the ongoing doing of philosophy and receptive composing of variations). It is the criteria immanent to the play of variations or the aspirations that arise out of the variations themselves according to which individual variations can be measured. Finally, it is also a matter of the extent to which the variations prove to be intersubjectively “satisfactory” and functional for the discourse participants, that is, the extent to which they satisfy particular historically and situationally conditioned expectations and needs. The question here is whether the variations say something to us, whether they give us a better view of and make it easier for us to understand something that appears to us (still) questionable or in need of explanation, or not.

**6. Prospects**

In conclusion, we would like to once again make clear the purpose of our article by taking up two critical questions it may provoke.

Our aim in what we have said has been to give grounds for the thesis that philosophy teaching and the history of philosophy should be seen as two aspects of a unified play of variations. This is not least a matter of overcoming the dividing line that Hegel drew between two ways of doing philosophy, the systematic on one side of the line and the historical on the other. In order to make our thesis more concrete, illustrate it, and give it greater depth, we turned in the last section to Hans Blumenberg’s theory of the history of philosophy and his praxis of writing that history. Now, Blumenberg could in fact with some justice be cited as an example of a philosopher with an especially receptive way of working. Philosophers who describe their own work as systematic or analytical, in particular, might therefore ask us whether with our understanding of doing philosophy as composing variations and our choice of Blumenberg to illustrate it we have not taken a one-sided position in favour of the hermeneutical tradition.

However, the assertion that a philosophy that understands itself as, for example, aprioristic also proceeds by composing variations, in that it links up with earlier positions (agreeing with them, rejecting them, or whatever the case may be), but also with particular philosophical forms of praxis, and that these links presuppose a (cultural and institutional) framework, does not yet say anything about whether this philosophy’s internal claim to validity is justified or not. In addition, the assertion that every philosophical variation is aimed at future acts of variational linkage is not yet relativism about truth. We can readily take Descartes’s *Meditations* seriously in their systematic claim to be First Philosophy while at the same time rejecting Descartes’s claim to have historically restarted philosophy from scratch. The possibility of a priori knowledge is hence not excluded by an understanding of doing philosophy as composing variations. Rather, the self-understanding of philosophers who work systematically is only in need of correction when it is accompanied by the supposition that philosophical praxis takes place in a vacuum, that is, when the constitutive relationship of the philosopher’s own praxis to the history of philosophy is not acknowledged. The specific historicity of philosophy manifests itself according to our thesis – unlike in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, for example – not in the fact that philosophers stand from the beginning in a tradition that determines (and limits) their ways of thinking, but rather in the fact that in the course of doing philosophy, they actively link up with the history of philosophy and in this way “enter into” it.

Now for the second question: if our thesis is accepted, then the consequence for philosophy education is above all a shifting of coordinates in the way that we think and talk about the relationship between philosophy teaching and the history of philosophy. It is not that the history of philosophy is brought into the classroom but that the pupils become participants in the history of philosophy. But isn’t it an exaggeration to talk about pupils as participants in the history of philosophy when they are coming into contact with philosophy in the classroom for the first time, often have no new or original, let alone “historic,” ideas to contribute, and are presumably for the most part also not participating in public philosophical debates through publications? Isn’t this idea based on an idealized vision of the philosophy classroom and pupils doing philosophy?

In view of the realities of academia, it may indeed be easy to assume that particular prerequisites must be met for someone to participate in the history of philosophy and that it is really only possible to speak of such participation once a philosophical contribution has been judged “historic” by those who come after. However, this assumption is (especially from the perspective of philosophy education) unjustified. Unlike in the Catholic Church, for example, in philosophy there absolutely cannot be an exclusive order of “ordained priests” with special privileges compared to the group of the “laity.” For this reason, one of the goals of our argument was to describe the history of philosophy as structurally unresolved and accessible. Whether philosophical praxis becomes effective through participation in the public philosophical discourse or by influencing the practitioner’s own life – if only by the fact that they do philosophy in the first place – is irrelevant to the question of whether they participate in the history of philosophy understood as a play of variations.

Now, it is indeed the case that pupils in the classroom should first of all *learn* to do philosophy. At what point, however, have they learned enough to be qualified to participate in the history of philosophy? It does not seem reasonable to try to establish a particular threshold. Our suggestion is therefore to understand the learning process itself as a process of *becoming involved in the philosophical play of variations*. Where classroom practice is concerned, this might lead to an argument, for example, that becoming involved in a praxis of variational linkage with a previous speaker should also have a media component that takes into consideration the empirical significance of texts within the philosophical play of variations. We might further conclude that this process should be accompanied by an “expansion of the hypoleptic horizon” (Assmann) that increasingly makes the philosophical play of variations transparent and in the literal sense of the word *accessible* as an ongoing process over thousands of years.

To understand doing philosophy as composing variations naturally does not yet imply a judgment about where the instructional emphasis should fall – to what extent, for example, the receptive aspect of doing philosophy should be brought out, and to what extent this requires the reading of (primary) texts. Nevertheless, we hope to have shown that the history of philosophy is not just another external object in comparison to pupils’ activity of doing philosophy, something to which reference may be made in the classroom from time to time – or not. Understanding pupils as participating in the history of philosophy in the classroom offers a suitable point of departure, we believe, from which to rethink the concrete educational questions of whether, why, and how the history of philosophy should be “integrated” into philosophy teaching.

**7. Literatur**

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1. Cf. for an overview of this debate Rohbeck 2022, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Along these lines, Rohbeck (2016, 41) summarizes the situation as follows: “No one wishes any longer to dispense with the elements of the other side. Just as really understanding a text presupposes an independent formulation of the problem, so also every classroom conversation, if it is not to remain at the level of vague generalities, has to bring in philosophical texts.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For an overview of the scholarly controversy, see the following relevant collective volumes: Rée et al. (1978); Rorty et. al. (1984); Hare (1988); Boss (1994); Sorell / Rogers (2005); Cesalli et al. (2017) (Studia philosophica 76). Bertold’s (2011) study also summarizes the debates in the German-speaking area up to that time. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We use ‘praxis’ here in a broad sense to characterize doing philosophy as an activity, without thereby intending to identify it as a praxis in the strict sense in which *praxis* is opposed to *poiesis*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There is broad agreement that even if Hegel did not found the philosophy of the history of philosophy, he elevated it to a previously unattained level of reflection, so that subsequent theoretical approaches, not only nineteenth-century ones, take his conception as their starting point (cf. on this, e.g., Geldsetzer 1968, Schneider 2007, and on the philosophy of history in general Schnädelbach 1974; for twentieth-century developments Bertold 2011). Engagement with Hegel remains central even in systematic studies of the topic in this century (e.g., Angehrn 2003; Stekeler-Weithofer 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a concise overview of the set of issues we sketch below, see Angehrn 2014, 206–214. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. „Aber um in der empirischen Gestalt und Erscheinung, in der die Philosophie geschichtlich auftritt, ihren Fortgang als Entwicklung der Idee zu erkennen, muß man freilich die Erkenntnis der Idee schon mitbringen, so gut als man zur Beurteilung der menschlichen Handlungen die Begriffe von dem, was recht und gehörig ist, mitbringen muß. Sonst, wie wir dies in so vielen Geschichten der Philosophie sehen, bietet sich dem ideenlosen Auge freilich nur ein unordentlicher Haufen von Meinungen dar.“ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Fulda (2007, 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The following reflections serve to show that three initially plausible and attractive strategies are not conducive to the purpose from a systematic perspective. We present the three strategies alongside one another in schematic form and do not claim that they represent the views of particular philosophy educators or groups. For this reason, we refrain in this section from documenting the relevance of each view by corresponding literature citations. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. An argument against the assumption that engagement with the history of philosophy is especially useful for doing philosophy is found in Sauer 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Presentation on this topic at the 2023 annual conference of the Gesellschaft für Philosophie- und Ethikdidaktik. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The first sentence of the preface to the first edition of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* can be read as a paradigmatic formulation of eternalism in this sense (Kant 2014: 11): „Die menschliche Vernunft hat das besondere Schicksal in einer Gattung ihrer Erkenntnisse: daß sie durch Fragen belästigt wird, die sie nicht abweisen kann, denn sie sind ihr durch die Natur der Vernunft selbst aufgegeben, die sie aber auch nicht beantworten kann, denn sie übersteigen alles Vermögen der menschlichen Vernunft.“ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In this model, the phases of discovering the problem, refining the problem, and solving it independently are followed by a fourth phase of “engaging with the solutions of past and present thinkers” (Sistermann 2016: 213); for a critique of the bonbon model’s understanding of philosophy, cf. Paret 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The following section builds on and expands the reflections found in Wellmann 2023, a first attempt to make the theory of cultural memory fruitful for philosophy education. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The extent to which Assmann’s theory gives or is even intended to give a plausible answer to the much-debated question of the reason or reasons for the emergence of philosophy is not relevant here. Assmann’s explanation nevertheless agrees with the current scholarly consensus insofar as he neither traces the emergence of philosophy to one or more single causes or to outstanding founders (such as Thales, Parmenides, or Socrates) or a supposed Greek genius but instead considers it as a gradual intersubjective process conditioned by the interplay of a variety of factors (cf. on this Laks 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Havelock 1963; a concise synopsis of the theoretical approach is found in Havelock 2017; on its reception by Luhmann, see Assmann 2018, 284 note 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Assmann’s theory is thus very much part of the same line of thinking as critics of the “myth of writing,” like Jäger (2004), who argue against a monocausal ascription of particular cultural phenomena to the distinctive characteristics of Greek alphabetic writing. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. A criticism of eternalism might be that it fails to recognize the significance of such a framework or to provide one, because it assumes in advance the identity and permanence (at least in philosophically relevant aspects) of the philosophical communicative situation. Cf. Assmann 2018: 287f.: „Die Sache gehört […] ganz und gar in den Horizont der ‚zerdehnten‘ Situation. Man könnte ebensowenig nach Hunderten von Jahren auf diese Sache Bezug nehmen wie auf das, was der Vorredner gesagt hat, wenn nicht auch hier spezielle Vorkehrungen zur Institutionalisierung von Permanenz getroffen würden, die diese Sache im Bewußtsein späterer Geschlechter präsent halten. Worauf es ankommt, ist eine transsituative Fixierung von Relevanz.“ [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Even if a teacher without any knowledge of the history of philosophy merely relies on methods acquired by practical intuition, we must still speak of a variational reference to the history of philosophy (albeit a mediated and to this extent likely nontransparent one). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cf. along these lines also Richter 2016: 62: “In order to be able to meaningfully take up Rohbeck’s suggestion of a transfer of methods [. . .] from a philosophical and educational perspective in the first place, detailed subject knowledge and competent handling of the positions found in the history of philosophy and the scholarly literature [. . .] is a prerequisite. Philosophy/ethics and instruction in teaching methods cannot be seen as two separate areas. There is no sensible way to separate what to teach from how to teach it.” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Assmann explains what he means by “progress” with reference to the historian Johann Gustav Droysen and the latter’s adoption of the Aristotelian formula *epídosis* *eis* *hautó*, which Assmann translates as „Hinzufügung zu sich selbst“. Droysen turned the phrase (which occurs only once in Aristotle, in a parenthetical remark at *De anima* II, 5, 417b6–7) into a key term in his own theory of history, making humanity’s continuous “self-supplementation” (*epídosis* *eis* *hautó*) a fundamental principle of history itself (this theory is most clearly laid out in the introductory chapter of Droysen’s *Historik* 1958: 9–20; on Droysen’s reception of Aristotle cf. Hackel 2019). However, the idea of progress, as expressed in the concept of *epídosis* or supplementation, is inseparably linked in Droysen with the assumption of a superordinate and rational goal of human history as a whole. In his interpretation of history as a history of progress, Droysen, who attended Hegel’s lectures on the philosophy of history as a student, adopts most of the central assumptions of Hegel’s philosophy of history, rejecting only Hegel’s assumption that history’s ultimate goal is knowable (for more on this, see Bauer 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, Husserliana, vol. VI, ed. Walter Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954), 15–17. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In the introduction to *Die ontologische Distanz* Blumenberg calls “the historicity of the ‘history’ of philosophy” the “most obscure” and “perhaps ultimate topic of philosophy.” Cf. Blumenberg, *Ontologische Distanz*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. On the question-and-answer scheme: This is a scheme or principle for describing the dynamics of intellectual history that Blumenberg introduces in several places in his writings, potentially for heuristic use in further research. (Cf. its first appearance in Blumenberg, “Die Vorbereitung der Neuzeit,” *Philosophische Rundschau* 9 (1961) 2/3, 81–133, 85 ff.; cf. *Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 73 ff.; 542 ff.) It is not intended to stipulate an unconditionally valid transcendental, a priori, essential relationship that would necessarily determine the course of intellectual history. Blumenberg’s approach takes a critical attitude toward the substantializing of problems, the historicity of which tends to be ignored in doxographically oriented histories of ideas, which is not to say that his own model does not also include the (critical) history of problems in its methodology. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Cf. Blumenberg, *Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 558: „Sie [die hermeneutische Aufgabe, Anm.v.m.] besteht hier wie sonst darin, Aussagen, Doktrinen und Dogmen, Spekulationen und Postulate als Antworten auf Fragen zu beziehen, deren Projektion auf den Hintergrund des Dokumentierten, unser Verstehen ausmacht.“ [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Blumenberg, *Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 542: „Es genügt, daß die Rahmenbedingungen bewußtseinsträger sind als die ihnen zugeordneten Inhalte, die Fragen im Vergleich zu den Antworten also relativ konstant.“ Dennoch sind die Fragen selbst auch geschichtlich: „Bestimmte Fragen werden im neuen Umbruch nicht mehr gestellt, die einst auf sie gegebenen Antworten erscheinen als schiere Dogmatik, phantastische Redundanz.“ (ebd.) Als Beispiel führt Blumenberg hier die Frage nach der Unsterblichkeit an, nach der nicht zu jeder Zeit gefragt würde. Nicht jedes Problem beschäftige alle zu jeder Zeit gleichermaßen. Blumenberg: Wir „werden uns von der Vorstellung frei machen müssen, es gebe einen festen Kanon der >großen Fragen<, die durch die Geschichte in konstanter Dringlichkeit die menschliche Wissbegierde beschäftigen und den Anspruch auf Welt- und Selbstdeutung motivieren“ (ebd., 75). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. As Blumenberg shows in his works *Die* *Legitimität der Neuzeit* and *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt*, threshold periods between historical eras are especially prominent as times when breaks or radical changes in such horizons of meaning become perceptible. It is thus also especially noticeable during threshold periods how particular answers given by one era may increasingly turn out to be inadequate for the next one and make variations on prior answers necessary. Threshold periods, as thresholds, allow us to look in both directions, so that the temporal incompatibility between the horizons of meanings that characterize different eras comes into view especially clearly. Direct overlaps between various theoretical positions, as well as differences in the sense of competition or mutual reception, the kind that occur during threshold periods, make the differences between historical eras *perceptible* for a phenomenology of history. For example, Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno may have said the same thing on the threshold between the Middle Ages and modernity, but the implications and consequences of what they literally said were different. Cf. also on this Daniel Weidner, “Was heißt eine Welt beschreiben? Hans Blumenbergs vielfache Horizonte,” in Eva Geulen and Claude Haas, *Formen des Ganzen* (Göttingen: Wallenstein, 2022), 408-409. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. On the term “reoccupation,” cf. also Kopp-Oberstebrink, “Umbesetzung,” in Robert Buch and Daniel Weidner, eds., *Blumenberg lesen: Ein Glossar* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 350–363. Cf. in greater depth Christoph Paret, “Lückenbüßer-Philosophie: Hans Blumenberg zwischen ‘Umbesetzung’ und Besetzungsverzögerung,” in Hannes Bajohr and Eva Geulen, eds., *Blumenbergs Verfahren: Neue Zugänge zum Werk* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2022), 269–288. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Blumenberg, *Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 541. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Blumenberg, *Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 541. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. We can trace this process of reoccupation along with Blumenberg in an especially striking way when we follow the different variants or reworkings of the same story (e.g., the Thales anecdote) or the same motif (e.g., the exit from Plato’s cave) or the changing meanings and contexts of the same metaphor (e.g., the ‘naked’ truth) across time. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. This point is also directed against a developmental historical approach, for which what is significant is only what gets (linearly) developed. That is, dead ends, detours, mere possibilities, approaches that are not further pursued, motifs that can now only be understood from a historical perspective, and the like are irrelevant for developmental historical models. Blumenberg, in contrast, is interested in exactly these things. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cf. on the term “background” Blumenberg, *Kopernikanische Wende,* 7: „Hintergrund ist das, was einen bestimmten Spielraum möglicher Veränderungen eröffnet, was bestimmte Schritte zuläßt und andere ausschließt. Hintergrund setzt Enge oder Weite, Beschränkung oder Freizügigkeit, den Horizont, in dem nach neuen Möglichkeiten gesucht werden kann, oder die einschließende Wand, auf der sich die altvertrauten Bilder und die Schatten des Bestehenden wiederholen.“ [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Goldstein, *Zwischen Texttreue und Spekulation*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. In *Das Lachen der Thrakerin*, he subjects different variants of the Thales anecdote from antiquity to the present to a philosophical analysis, and in *Höhlenausgänge*, he discusses the motif of the exit from the cave as a central metaphor of processes in the history of education on the basis of historical variations of Plato’s allegory of the cave. In the “case studies” (*Fallstudien*) in *Die* *Vollzähligkeit der Sterne*, he traces the metaphor of the “fall” of Adam and Eve up to the present and analyses it in its relationship to and difference from other variants. A number of other titles could also be cited. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. As is well known, this proverbial formulation is itself already a variant of the words that Plato puts in Socrates’s mouth in the *Apology* (21d). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Blumenberg Papers, DLA, Box 24, Socrates Section, quoted here from Brázda, *Variationen als Methode der Philosophiegeschichte*, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)