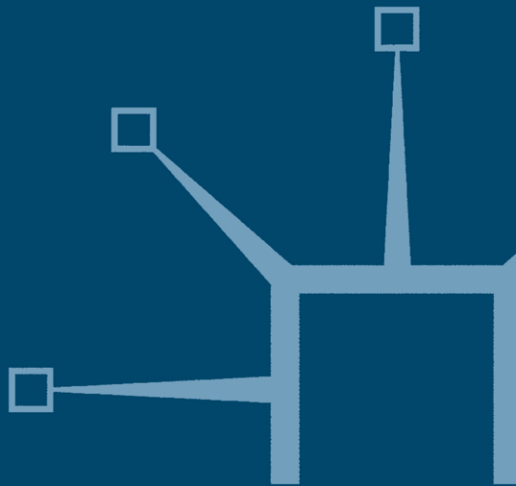


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History of Western Philosophy

Nigel Tubbs



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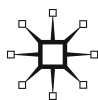
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History of Western Philosophy

Nigel Tubbs

University of Winchester, UK

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the 'true world' ... [is] the history of an error

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

*should we not be concerned as to whether this
fear of error is not just the error itself?*

Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*

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Preface

When I agreed with the publishers to write a *History of Western Philosophy* they hoped, I think, for an introductory text suitable for first year undergraduates. But in essence, such a book would only have been an introduction to other introductions to the history of Western philosophy. It would have tried to summarize the latter in ever more reductionist ways, replaying the same historical detail and the same shorthand versions of different periods and different writers. Instead, I have written a different kind of Introduction to the history of Western philosophy; an introduction, that is, to a different way of thinking about it.

I am introducing – perhaps reintroducing would be more accurate here – the idea that the history of Western philosophy is an autobiography of Western thought, a recollection of its own development, as of the child by the man. As it surveys this development it finds itself making all kinds of mistakes based on misunderstandings of itself in different ways at different times. But, as we know, those mistakes in our lives are formative. They make us what we are. The adult cannot eschew this development as something left far behind and overcome, for that is just another mistake that can be recollected, now, even as it is made. Rather, then, the more one examines one's autobiography, the more one finds out about who one is.

This is not just the benefit of hindsight. Hindsight suggests that one can see how one might have done things differently. But this is not the point of recollection. One recollects not to see how things might have been but to understand more clearly actually how they are.

The autobiography not only recollects the past, it educates the enquirer, the writer, in the present. And, perhaps most surprisingly, when recollection opens the enquirer to learning about the child as the father of the man, then the writer is also being opened to himself as living the life of learning. This openness is the concept of the future. True, the enquirer must presuppose himself to begin with, or else there is no beginning to the enquiry. But what he learns thereafter is that this presupposition of the enquirer, while unavoidable, is also one based in illusions. Here, the presupposition of the enquirer collapses under its own educational weight. In the recollection of his life he learns of himself formed in and from such learning. Indeed, he learns that he is only someone who learns and re-learns. This is a new truth – the truth of the

learner who learns, by learning, of himself as a learner – and it is a new manifestation of the theory and practice of philosophical education.

The autobiography that I am presenting below is that of Western thought undertaking to follow the maxim of the Delphic Oracle, to Know Thyself. This thought is present to itself in different shapes – as freedom, as nature, and as logic – but together they are the one educational relation that constitutes the autobiographical work. Freedom, nature, and logic learn of the truth of themselves as learning. Those who are sceptical of the imperialism that is grounded in the whole idea of a history of Western philosophy miss the point. It is in the enquiry, in the learning, that the imperialism of the project is most open to its being negated and undermined. The history of Western philosophy, as Know Thyself, is a – perhaps *the* – most effective form of self-critique that the West has available to it. It cannot survive this critique without the formative change that comes from negating its positing of itself. What it learns and how it changes is the subject of the following account of the history of Western philosophy.

* * * * *

If I can add a personal note now, I see ever more clearly the developing shape of my own thinking. I began my time in higher education as an undergraduate, a learner, who believed in the educative significance of sociology to disrupt natural consciousness with contingency, relativism, and dialectic. I then found that this education was called philosophy, or at least the philosophy that related to the European speculative tradition, and could be understood as the *contradiction of enlightenment*, or as *philosophy's higher education*. I worked in a few comprehensive schools in England and found a *new teacher* in the theory and practice of the learning learner. This theory and practice elicits a *philosophy of the teacher*. To draw out this higher education in Hegel in particular, I have argued for a different kind of Hegel, one that calls for an *education in Hegel*. Now, the *history of Western philosophy* presented below is this same theory of philosophical education writ large as the journey of Western thought to its recollection of itself in and as learning.

And, as at the end of each book, so at the end of this one, the next project has already made itself known: how to a teach present recollection? How to give voice to freedom and nature and logic as modern philosophical learning? My work with these questions will now form the basis of a new programme of studies at the University of Winchester, England, in Modern Liberal Arts.

Acknowledgements

I offer my thanks to the University of Winchester for the time given to me for writing this book, and for the opportunities they continue to afford me for bringing theory and practice together. I thank, too, the Department of Education Studies for their support.

I recollect my due, as always, to Howard and Josh.

Julie and Will have complemented beautifully my isolation with their love and friendship. They have ensured that the history of Western philosophy has always been informed by *The Office*, *Frasier*, Nadal and Federer, and Springsteen with the Sessions Band.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to someone who lives the theory and practice of learning to be the learner, and does so very much in the public eye – to Rowan.

Chandler's Ford
March 2009.

Introduction

What justification is there for writing another history of Western philosophy, and especially one that appears to repeat the same material in the same order that so many others have done before? Indeed, is not the very idea of a history of Western philosophy disreputable, outdated, and exhausted? Does it not ground itself in fantasies of totality and truth that are no longer appropriate or sound in a pluralist world? Is the history of Western philosophy not in fact the master narrative of all master narratives, and really only an apology for the imperialism of Western reason? Finally, is not the history of Western philosophy imbued with the arrogance of the idea that reason in Western civilization marks the highest form of social and political organization yet achieved on earth, and perhaps that mankind is capable of at all? Why, then, waste time and resources repeating a project that, in falling into such disrepute, is at best redundant and at worst dead?

The answer to these questions, probably not very different from any such apology, is that in what follows, we are offering the usual content of the history of Western philosophy but understood in an unusual way. We are concerned to look behind the familiar collection of the content of the history of Western philosophy to search for the *conditions of possibility* that sustain it. This means looking at what is going on behind the back of the content. It is to ask, what conditions are presupposed that have shaped this content into what we know as the history of Western philosophy?

Conclusion

What emerges from our study is a tale of two relations – life and death, and metaphysics and social life – and two logics – Neoplatonic logic and aporetic logic, of which more later. The story we will tell is of the *education*

2 *History of Western philosophy*

of the Western master about the certainties that he *posits* for himself and for his idea of truth. Philosophy will slowly erode these certainties until they collapse under the weight of their empty assertions.¹

This story begins with the template of positing as it appears in Ancient Greece and is played out in the dialectic between Plato and Aristotle. This template then becomes concrete and divided in the emerging and struggling self-consciousness of Christian subjectivity. Truth here is posited in Neoplatonic principles where doubt, ambivalence and contradiction are marked as errors in relation to the undivided, unchangeable, and simple essence of the one.² However, these *cultures of error*, as we will come to know them, although alienated from the truth whose principles they espouse, nevertheless take culture, or education, very seriously. We will see in Augustine, Eriugena, and Aquinas, as well as in the Judaic philosophy of Maimonides, and the Islamic philosophy of al-Farabi and others, how closely related truth and ambivalence are in the concept of philosophical education. These cultures of error, including the rationalism of Descartes, pass into the modern mind in the Kantian revolution of the relation between thought and object, and in the Hegelian experience of this revolution. Here Neoplatonic logic collapses into the aporetic or recollective logic of the modern mind wherein, also, social relations and metaphysical relations come together, although not in any simple sense of unification. We then briefly explore some examples from the recent history of this aporetic logic in what is loosely called the Continental or European tradition, before, finally, discussing ways in which aporetic logic re-educates the master about three of his most trusted logical standpoints: self over other, man over God, and life over death. Such a presentation of the history of Western philosophy amounts to nothing less than a challenge to the West, and to its current standpoint in the bourgeois master, to 'Know Thyself' in the truth of the logic of its vulnerabilities.

The implications of this reading of the history of Western philosophy are far-reaching. It commends a vision of and for the West, and of philosophy within it, of personal, social, spiritual, and global life characterized by *learning*. It commends education *as truth* within the experience of some of the West's most intractable binary oppositions – self and other, East and West, rich and poor, master and slave, and life and death. This truth in education opens up Western reason not only to its own rational aporias, but to the spiritual significance of reason's complicity in these aporias. Philosophical education emerges here as the critical voice that challenges any and all standpoints that

posit immunity for themselves from modern abstract reason and from its collapse into contradiction and negation. In addition, and this is its absolute significance as education, this critical voice learns of truth in this negation. Living with the implications of negation, and enduring these negative states, is precisely what has its truth in philosophical education. Learned as *recollection*,³ the history of Western philosophy becomes a *present* negation. Learned of as a totality constituted by negation and education, these negative states are also in themselves open to the dialectic of truth and vulnerability. This openness is the recollective concept of the future.

The substance of our reading of the history of Western philosophy, then, is this: recollection teaches that the history of Western philosophy is the study of an error carried in thought and displayed when thought tries to comprehend the true. Thought is deemed to be in error because its comprehension is compound, contingent, and changeable in comparison to the true which is simple, self-sufficient, and unchangeable. Recollective logic in the modern mind offers a fundamental re-education about this relation of truth and thought. It offers the logic of aporia as recollective, and it offers this recollective learning as the modern logic of philosophical principles. This means, in turn, that we can present a recollected history of Western philosophy as both chronological content and the disruption of this chronology.

First principles

The distinctiveness of our approach is illustrated by our seeking to uncover what it is that the shapes of thought that constitute the history of Western philosophy have taken for granted in presenting themselves. If the history of Western philosophy has been characterized as the logical search for first principles, then we are seeking the presuppositions of logic that drive and underpin such a search. We seek the logic of logic. This takes the history of Western philosophy into unfamiliar waters, and requires certain key terms and concepts to be understood in new ways in order to stay afloat. We will briefly rehearse this buoyancy now.

The history of Western philosophy is grounded in presuppositions of Neoplatonic logic that are rarely examined in their own right. These presuppositions are the conditions of the possibility of the principles by which thought works and by which it investigates itself, and which therein underpin the history of Western philosophy. The principles are those of non-contradiction, of first cause, and of the absurdity of infinite regression. Non-contradiction eschews negation as other than

truth. It is, therefore, the ground of the logic in which the standpoint of infinite regression – where a cause needs to be explained by a cause *ad infinitum* – is seen to be *clearly* absurd and revealing of the necessity for a first cause. The absurdity of this infinite regression, and of the pernicious contradiction of lack of a first cause, was avoided by the *clearly* obvious necessity of God, or an unmoved mover, or a first principle.

We present later the case that what these principles presuppose and reproduce are certain fundamental relations – metaphysical, social, and natural – which, in turn, presuppose and reproduce the conditions of their own possibility. Such positing is *clearly* evident in the presupposition that infinite regression is *clearly* absurd. Through the educational concept of recollection, we will illustrate what it is that ‘clearly’ here takes so easily and incontrovertibly for granted. It will reveal how such positing has its appearances in the world in the fundamental relations of truth and error, independence and dependence, God and man, self and other, and master and slave. If you recognize these terms as of Hegelian inspiration, then you would be right. In turn these relations are manifestations of an absolute relation, that of life and death. Life and death, we will argue, are the pedagogy of the mind of God making itself known to the intellect.

In the presentation of the history of Western philosophy that follows, then, we are concerned to discover the ways in which logical principles posit these relations in particular ways at different times, ways that become the irrefutable bases of philosophic proof. We will follow this positing from its beginnings in Ancient Greece to Kant and Hegel, and beyond, where by means of positing, positing becomes aware of itself as groundless. This groundlessness becomes the aporetic logic and content, then, of the modern philosophical mind. What is learned here in the modern mind is the truth of positing, wherein philosophy is able to trace a genealogy of its thought back through the various shapes of its conditions of possibility to that of life and death. It is here that the history of Western philosophy is revealed as grounded in the positing of life as separate from death, and of groundlessness as separate from truth.

This positing is inevitable and unavoidable, for it is the pedagogy of the truth in its own aporetic logic. Life is that which posits itself as *what is*, and over and against *what is not*. To know this is to learn of life as its own self-determining illusion. This changes fundamentally how to comprehend the history of Western philosophy. Instead of recording the ways in which the logic of non-contradiction, of first cause, and of the absurdity of infinite regression have been wielded by philosophers

in trials of rigour, robustness, and consistency, now we can look behind the scenes of these trials to their conditions of possibility in the illusions of life and its eschewing of negation and death as other. As such, the history of Western philosophy is transformed from the mere presupposition of life as the ground or master of logic, into the story of its suppression of death and of the logic of negation. We are now able to read the history of Western philosophy as the manifestation of life's misrecognition of its relation to death as it has shaped, and continues to shape, Western philosophy's notion of truth. It reveals the aporia of logic but learns, too, of the logic of aporia. It leaves the search for first principles grounded only in the illusions of assertion and positing, but learns that the groundlessness of positing has its principle in its negative character. This amounts to nothing less than the re-education of the West about how to understand itself.

Recollection, not recognition

In order to emphasize the educational nature of this aporetic logic we will employ the notion of recollection, and invoke aporetic recollective logic as the form and content of the modern mind. This recollective logic has its ground in the groundlessness of positing, which is the same as to say, that it has its ground in the truth of death in life, of the slave in the master, of God in man, and of the other in the self. It is a logic known as positing by positing. *Clearly* this threatens to collapse into infinite regression if conditions need their own conditions, and so on. But recollection learns something different here than does Neoplatonism. As we will come to see, it learns of a logic of positing. This logic unfolds itself in thought's self-education as the condition of the possibility of Neoplatonic logic and principles. Such recollection of Neoplatonic logic is the modern subjective and substantial mind characterized by Kantian and Hegelian logic.

It would be simpler here to describe the relation between Neoplatonic logic and recollective logic in the educative terms of the *recognition of misrecognition*. This would mean that the content of the history of Western philosophy misrecognizes itself when it fails to know its own conditions of possibility, and that Neoplatonic logic is characterized by this misrecognition. This would also enable us to say that recollective logic recognizes this misrecognition and thus comprehends the mistakes that Neoplatonic logic has repeated. However, the education contained in the recognition of misrecognition is insufficient to describe the educational significance of recollective logic. The logic of

the recognition of misrecognition is a simple logic where, in learning and understanding, truth overcomes error. But this only raises exactly the kind of philosophical question that characterizes our study of the history of Western philosophy, namely, what is presupposed in this positing of philosophical education as overcoming contradiction? The logic of recognition overcoming misrecognition is all too easily read as just another positing by life of mastery over the error of negation and contradiction. Recognition, and even the more refined concept of *re*-cognition, express a new knowing, but do not suggest with equal impact the preservation of what is misrecognized.

Somehow, recollective logic has to hold what it has learned about overcoming having its condition of possibility in positing, but without again obscuring this education behind another such positing, or mastery. But how is this possible? How can one recollect one's genealogy in the conditions of possibility, or in life and death, without again taking the side of life and using philosophical education as mastery over negative error? How can it criticize the positing of truth and error without positing truth and error in doing so? The answer is that it cannot. Here the two logics part company. Aporetic logic finds something of itself in the nothing, where Neoplatonic logic finds only error and demands that truth be other to this error. Recollective logic knows the groundlessness of the positing that is the condition of its own possibility, to be neither an overcoming nor a non-overcoming, but to be education. It knows the groundlessness of positing to be both formation and re-formation, an assertion and an education about assertion by assertion. Positing, re-formed by itself here in education, is the educational logic of recollection. And the name of the truth of this aporetic logic is learning.

This concept of learning is the truth that Neoplatonic logic ruled out as contrary to the truth of what is. Where such logic held that nothing can come from infinite regression or contradiction, and that God must contain neither of these, now the modern mind finds something in the nothing; it finds itself. It finds learning to be *what is*. Learning holds overcoming and non-overcoming as the one divided experience. It retrieves the negative that life has suppressed but does so without also suppressing the life that suppresses it. Learning is by its very nature complicit in itself.

The three relations of philosophy

We will see many times below how, when thought tries to think truth in itself, it fails because it collapses into contradictions, not least into the contradiction of infinite regression. Thought expresses this error

in and as three relations to the true. In the *natural* relation thought is error against the laws of the natural universe; in the *social* relation thought is error against freedom and in the *metaphysical* relation thought is error against the truth of the in-itself, or God. Each relation posits thought as error, in that it is separated from its object and unable to unite with it by knowing the object in itself. But these relations of posited error mask the very positing that is their condition of possibility, creating therein an illusion of an originary relation that is unknowable in itself. It is these illusions which have established themselves as the 'proper' content of the history of Western philosophy. But in such a history comprehended in recollection, it is the nature of these illusions and the positing they hide that is the focus of the enquiry.

There is not space in the present volume to trace all three relations in the history of Western philosophy. But neither is it possible to follow one without implication in the others. The present volume therefore employs the following strategy in response to this. We will, in the main, pursue the metaphysical as it appears in relation to the true, and in the way it posits a logic of first principles. We have to accept that this does not do justice either to nature or freedom in the story of the history of Western philosophy. This is addressed in small part in the *Appendix* to the text which presents a recollective reading of freedom in Hegel's philosophy of history. However, in examining the ancient mind we will include the natural and spiritual appearances of thought's relation to truth alongside the logical and metaphysical. Then, in the cultures of error of the mediaeval mind the natural and spiritual relations are subsumed within metaphysics. This reflects the actuality of the mediaeval world in the sense that the metaphysical dominates other relations, perhaps symbolized in the relation between the trivium and the quadrivium in mediaeval liberal arts. The natural relation re-asserts itself in Bacon's *Novum Organum*, where the object is given its own status and is freed from the mediaeval view that the world exists for man. Indeed, inductive logic here claims to be able to create or invent new particulars by itself.

Similarly, the social relation re-asserts itself in the modern mind. More accurately the social and metaphysical relations here recollect themselves in the aporetic logic they share. This modern mind is characterized by the Kantian experience of groundlessness and the Hegelian experience of this Kantian experience. We will explore this later in Part III. What we do not explore is the natural relation in the modern mind except as it appears in the illusions of life and death.⁴

The metaphysical relation expresses the relation of finite thought and experience to the true as one of error. As such, the term metaphysical already carries and hides the positing of its own condition of possibility. This refers to the positing of truth beyond mere thought in a realm *a priori* and not *a posteriori*, and therefore not dependent on human experience. This distinction has its actuality in three ways. The *a priori* is other than the *a posteriori*; the *a priori* is master over the *a posteriori*; and the *a priori* is something in itself and the *a posteriori* is nothing in itself. Thus, metaphysics is the positing of the distinctions of self and other, master and slave, and life and death. There is also here a staging of the metaphysical relation, where life and death beget master and slave, which beget self and other, which beget metaphysics. But, in the illusions of Western, modern, abstract, rational consciousness the staging appears in reverse. It appears that it is in metaphysics that we learn of the separation of the subject in itself from its being known, and of the priority of the *a priori* over experience. It is from this, then, that thought believes itself able to understand identity, priority, and the error of negation. It is in the light of recollection that the illusions of this staging are exposed.

This experience demonstrates how identity, priority, and the error of negation all posit the relation of life and death as *what is* over death as *what is not*. This positing, unknown to Neoplatonic metaphysics as positing, is the logic that shaped over 2000 years of the history of Western philosophy. It is in the modern mind that metaphysics learns of or recollects the conditions of its own possibility as posited, and learns too that its logic is aporetic and recollective. Here, as it were, everything changes. Recollection knows the logic of death in life, of the slave in the master, and of the other in the self. It knows too, of the recollective truth of the aporias of non-contradictory logic, of first cause, and of infinite regression. This is the challenge to Neoplatonic logic that emerges from the modern Kantian and Hegelian mind. We will return to this in Part III.

We must also note here, that if the logic of first cause is undermined, then one of the cornerstones of the logic of the existence of God is also removed. God known Neoplatonically is the posited necessity of a first cause. But if the logic of first cause is only an illusion of the appearance of the life and death relation, then God becomes only an effect of this illusion. However, and as we will return to in Chapter 7 below, recollection is not the death of God *per se*, only the death of God in a way that reveals his actuality. Nor, in the same way, does recollection take sides in the debate that so preoccupied Neoplatonic logic, as to whether the

universe is eternal or created. Recollection seeks the conditions of the possibility that are posited in both claims. The need for a creator posits life needing a beginning from nothing, for otherwise, due to infinite regression, there is no cause for the universe. The case for infinity, on the other hand, posits creation as a contradiction of God's identity for it involves a decision, a change in God, who is posited as unchangeable.⁵ Both sides of the argument are grounded in the positing of contradiction as error. When recollection knows the conditions of the possibility of the arguments for creation and infinity, and for God and first cause, to be the positing of life without death, it knows too that the groundlessness which Neoplatonism seeks to avoid, in fact grounds itself. This ground of groundlessness is the education that learning of its conditions of possibility in recollection re-forms the truth of the thought that thinks it. This, as we will see, is the condition of the possibility of the modern mind in the history of Western philosophy, and, therein, of our knowing God.

We will present this account of the history of Western philosophy below. This means we will concentrate on ways in which the illusion of thought as error plays a decisive role in the history of Western philosophy, as well as the ways in which different thinkers have tried to negotiate with error to find truth within it. We will see some remarkable examples of how error and negativity have been viewed as formative of the knowledge of the true. The history of Western philosophy has always carried its truth with it, but in its history some have worked harder than others to work with the conditions of its own possibility. For us to recollect this truth is also to pay tribute to the struggles and to the truth of those who are our recollection.

The end of the history of Western philosophy

Famously, recollection was present at the beginning of the history of Western philosophy as one of the subjects Socrates spoke of just before his death. Two and a half thousand years later the history of Western philosophy can recollect the reports of its own death. It can take its beginning from the death of Socrates, and its end from the death of the concept of the history of Western philosophy. These reports of its death have not been exaggerated, only misunderstood. As death returns to educate the life of Western philosophy, so it recollects backwards, looking for ways in which negation and contradiction have been posited as error; it recollects itself presently as this recollection; and it recollects forwards as the past of a future that is now open to