

Gilsonian method of the history of philosophy

Key words: Étienne Gilson, history of philosophy, philosophy, methodology, *history of philosophy itself*

The concept of the history of philosophy as the background of its methodology

A lot has been said about Etienne Gilson's concept of history, also known as the "philosophical conception of the history of philosophy". His concept of history is generally known among researchers of the history of human thought¹.

It boils down to the study of "pure" philosophical problems in the history of philosophy. Gilson himself uses the term 'history of philosophy' itself. It literally means "the history of philosophy in itself" or "the history of philosophy as

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¹ J. Czerkawski, *Gilsonowska koncepcja historii filozofii*, „Roczniki Filozoficzne”, 13 (1965)1, p. 61-78; M. Gogacz, *W sprawie koncepcji historii filozofii*, „Zeszyty Naukowe KUL”, 7 (1964) 3, p. 53-57; S. Swieżawski, *Zagadnienie historii filozofii*, Warszawa 1966; M. Gogacz, *O pojęciu i metodzie historii filozofii*, „Ruch Filozoficzny” 25 (1966) 1/2, p. 76-80; M. Gogacz, *Rola historii filozofii w filozofii Boga*, „Studia z filozofii Boga”, ed. B. Bejze, t. 3, Warszawa 1977, ATK, p. 365-413; S. Janeczek, *Między filozoficzną historią filozofii a historią kultury. Z rozważań nad metodą historii filozofii w Polsce*, „Roczniki Filozoficzne” 55 (2007)1, p. 103-105; (All three articles by M. Gogacz were reprinted in: M. Gogacz, *Historia filozofii w poszukiwaniu realizmu*, Warszawa 2011.) P. Milcarek, *Rozumienie filozofii chrześcijańskiej przez Etienne Gilsona*, in: *Etienne Gilson. Filozofia i mediewistyka*, ed. T. Klimski, Warszawa 2007, p. 37-48; A. Andrzejuk, *Koncepcja filozofii średniowiecznej jako filozofii chrześcijańskiej i niektóre jej konsekwencje w ujęciu Etienne Gilsona*, in: *Ibid.*, p. 49-56.

such”, but it can be understood, as Jan Czerkawski rightly wrote, as the history of philosophy properly understood, or simply “the proper history of philosophy”². The history of philosophy understood in this way belongs to philosophical disciplines and not, for example, to historical ones. Stefan Swieżawski noticed that the history of philosophy itself is first and foremost the history of metaphysics³. Gilson claims that such treatment of the subject of the history of philosophy proves the unity of philosophical experience, clearly different from philosophical historiography, consisting in showing endless philosophical disputes and successive questioning of the results obtained. According to Gilson, this unity arises from the “impersonal necessity” to which both a philosopher and his philosophy are subjected.

First, each philosopher is completely free to establish his own set of rules, but once he has established them, he no longer thinks as he would like to, but as he should. Secondly, from the discussed facts it seems that any philosopher’s attempt to avoid the consequences of his own attitude is doomed to failure. What he does not want to say himself will be spoken by his disciples, if he has any; and if he did not have disciples, his thought may remain unspoken for centuries, but the thought does exist, and anyone who returns to the same principles, even after many centuries, will have to face the same conclusions. It therefore seems that although philosophical ideas never exist indepen-

dently of philosophers and their philosophies, they are to a certain extent independent of both philosophers and their philosophies⁴.

As a reaction to the Gilson’s statement presented above, Mieczysław Gogacz warned against a completely idealistic interpretation of the history of philosophy it, which would say that the philosophical theories develop throughout the history in a necessary manner and independently of human intellects⁵.

The starting problem - as can be seen in the quoted standpoint of Gilson - is the system of basic principles that determine a philosopher’s thinking, pushing him to think in a certain and determined way. These basic theses come down to a philosopher’s understanding of reality itself. Gilson emphasizes that the contextual explanation of a philosopher’s view does not so much consist of juxtaposing his various statements on a subject, but in presenting these statements in the light of his understanding of reality⁶. This view stems from Gilson’s belief that every philosophy has a similar structure: a set of starting points, universally applicable laws of reason, and a set of conclusions that result or may result from adopted starting points. If they do not, then the doctrine is inconsistent. There may be “contingent” elements in the form of “philosophical events” and some conditions.

Such an approach to philosophy gives rise to the thesis that philosophy is

² J. Czerkawski, *Gilsonowska koncepcja historii filozofii*, p. 61.

³ S. Swieżawski, *Zagadnienie historii filozofii*, p. 286.

⁴ É. Gilson, *Jedność doświadczenia filozoficznego*, trans. Z. Wrzeszcz, warszawa 1968, p. 208.

⁵ M. Gogacz, *Historia filozofii w poszukiwaniu realizmu*, p. 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

somehow independent of a philosopher himself, who actually decides about the starting points of his reflection, and then - according to Gilson's words - he does not think as he wants, but as he should. Moreover, his philosophy resides in a seed-like form in these starting points, as in some *rationes seminales*, and therefore it includes all conclusions that can be drawn from the principles adopted, even if their author has never uttered them. Of course, Gilson adds, an author is not responsible for what he did not say; however, it does not mean that these unspoken conclusions do not belong to his philosophy.

One can clearly see what a strong emphasis Gilson placed on the philosophical character of a history of philosophy. This was due to his absolute conviction that a history of philosophy is a necessary part of philosophy itself and as such is simply indispensable to a philosopher: "The history of philosophy, he used to say, is much more a part of philosophy itself than a history of science - a part of science itself."⁷ On this basis, S. Swieżawski proposed an attractive definition of a history of philosophy as "a philosopher's workshop"⁸. Therefore, M. Gogacz tried to clarify the relations between a history of philosophy and philosophy and - which is more interesting - the relations between a historian of philosophy and systematic philosopher. Firstly, Gogacz claimed that the truth is located in both approaches differently. For a systematic philosopher, there is the "truth of thin-

gs", because he refers to the views on a topic and examines their truthfulness. The historian of philosophy shows the causal connections between philosophical starting points and their consequences in specific systems, in specific authors, in specific texts. The truth in the history of philosophy is, therefore, the truth about "philosophical events" (Gilson's expression). On the basis of these distinctions, Gogacz also tries to specify the subject of a history of philosophy. He says that it is not only a method, although for a systematic philosopher it is a workshop; it is also not something like *ancilla philosophiae*, although it is indispensable for the practice of philosophy. So, he proposes to look at the history of philosophy from three perspectives:

- 1) from the perspective of a systematic philosopher, the history of philosophy is an auxiliary discipline of philosophy;
- 2) from the perspective of a historian of philosophy, it is "an analysis of a fragment of the history of intellectual culture";
- 3) a methodologist of philosophy, "has his own separate subject and specific research methods"⁹.

Therefore, M. Gogacz believes that the philosophical texts are the material subject of a history of philosophy, and there are two formal subjects: firstly, there is the formal quod subject, i.e., "what interests a historian of philosophy", and this is the philosophical problem contained in the studied text; secondly, there

⁷ É. Gilson, *Jedność doświadczenia filozoficznego*, p. 5.

⁸ See S. Janeczka, *Metodologia historii filozofii w ujęciu Stefana Swieżawskiego*, in: *Stefan Swieżawski. Filozofia i historia filozofii*, ed. T. Klimski, Warszawa 2008, p. 23-67.

⁹ M. Gogacz, *Historia filozofii w poszukiwaniu realizmu*, p. 29.

is the formal quo, which are the methods of analysis and interpretation of texts and philosophical problems.

The history of philosophy understood in this way requires adequate research¹⁰. Gilson divides the work of a historian of philosophy into three stages (however, he sometimes treats the first and second stages together). The first of these stages,

specifically preparatory, is the “history of philosophical literature”, the second is the “history of philosophical doctrines”, and only the third is “the history of proper philosophy”¹¹. Different research procedures are used at each of these stages, and the researcher is required to have different competences.

Characteristics of a historian of philosophy at various stages of the history of philosophy

The first stage in the history of philosophy

The first stage in the history of philosophy actually boils down to the preparation of philosophical texts as a source of historical research. Therefore, it requires palaeography, editorial and linguistic competences specifically, which, in total, are called the historical methods. He also emphasizes that the end of this work is the correct edition of a philosophical text, and not its interpretation. However, this work should be done by a histo-

rian of philosophy and not, for example, by a palaeographer who prepares editions of diplomatic codes. Moreover, sometimes interpretative methods will be necessary at this stage of the work when historical methods prove to be insufficient. However, this is the last resort, and Gilson warns against the usage of the interpretive method at this stage, because it may result in failure.

The second stage in the history of philosophy Gilson's proposal

Interpretation takes place at the second stage of the history of philosophy, while we examine individual texts, doctrines of various authors and schools. It is a well-known account of the history of

philosophy, which consists of disputes between successive authors, competing schools, and seemingly unsettled philosophical disputes. This stage consists of - according to Gilson - researching, re-

¹⁰ This was already pointed out by Andrzej Nowik in the article entitled *Zależność metody historii filozofii od przedmiotu metafizyki u Etienne Gilsona* (in: *Etienne Gilson. Filozofia i mediewistyka*, p. 89-108).

¹¹ I use the nomenclature of Jan Czerkawski from the quoted article entitled *Gilsonowska koncepcja historii filozofii*, p. 61. M. Gogacz, in turn, distinguishes four stages in the history of philosophy: 1) the editorial stage (critical edition of texts); 2) the stage of research on the history of philosophical texts and writings; 3) interpretative stage concerning authors; 4) interpretative stage that captures the history of problems. See. M. Gogacz, *Historia filozofii w poszukiwaniu realizmu*, p. 34.

constructing, understanding and explaining all existing philosophical views - it is simply, as he himself says, the historiography of philosophical views. As part of it, we establish facts, do some philological research, and build philosophical biography. The importance of this stage is crucial in the work of a historian of philosophy. Gilson tries to point to the methodology of the "middle", i.e., the methodology which is between ahistoric idealism which imposes the philosophical content of texts of old authors, and positivism the radical minimalism of the history of philosophy. According to Gilson, research at this stage in the history of philosophy has three main features: its first and essential feature is that the research is based on the analysis of texts, a kind of "return to the sources". The second feature is a specific "contextual analysis". Its methodology results from taking the structure of all philosophical doctrines into account. For every philosophy is based, according to Gilson - let us repeat it again - on several starting points which necessarily determine its conclusions; this is especially true of the concept of being. This concept, called the "vision of reality" in each author's case, is the starting point for understanding his detailed approaches. So, it is the key to understand the entire teaching of a philosopher. According to Gilson, this allows the doctrine to be "illuminated" from within and thus al-

lows for the most objective possible interpretation of it. M. Gogacz emphasizes that such a method of work frees the history of philosophy from verbalism, which may be the result of the excerptic method, in which theses are taken out of context and juxtaposed, presenting them as the views of the philosopher under development. It also frees from the necessity to use the "pagina fracta" method, which in turn consists in comparing various statements of the philosopher on the same topic in order to establish the right view, or its possible development or change. According to Gilson, the third important feature of this method is historical and philosophical erudition. A historian of philosophy must have historical, philosophical, theological, and even literary and linguistic competences and skills because he has to study the entire historical and philosophical background, and in general the entire complex of conditions of the philosophical doctrine, or the theory, or the author he is concerned about. J. Czerkawski notices at this point that "while discussing a problem in the analyzed doctrine Gilson gives first very often an extensive introduction, illustrating this problem historically so that the specificity of his theoretical solution becomes clearer"¹². M. Gogacz, in turn, emphasizes at this stage the study of the erudition of the analyzed author himself¹³.

¹² J. Czerkawski, *Gilsonowska koncepcja historii filozofii*, p. 71.

¹³ M. Gogacz, *Zawartość problemowa traktatu „De ente et essentia” Tomasza z Akwinu*, In: *Opera Philosophorum Medii Aevi*, t. 1, *Studia wokół problematyki esse (Tomasz z Akwinu i Boecjusz)*, Warszawa 1976, p. 24-31.

Modifications of Swieżawski and Gogacz

S. Swieżawski proposes so-called ‘a philosophical questionnaire’, i.e. a set of questions about the philosophy of the researched author. This questionnaire should be developed in such a way that it does not determine the content of the answer, so that it is as neutral as possible, and in order to maintain objectivity, it requires the historian of philosophy to provide information about the vision of reality he adopts. Swieżawski often emphasized that providing this information was a sign of professional honesty of a historian of philosophy.

M. Gogacz worked out the methodology of the research of a historian of philosophy concerning this stage of the history of philosophy. According to him, first of all, it is necessary to identify the theory of being in the researched author. It can be directly included in the text – then it is the “method of identifying the theory of being directly”, or this theory must be reconstructed – and then it is the “method of identifying the theory of being indirectly”¹⁴. In both cases, according to Gogacz, an “immanent” analysis of his metaphysical views should be carried out, which should be consistent with the author’s intentions. This analysis aims to achieve four research purposes:

- 1) determining the meaning of the terms used by the author;
- 2) translating the meaning of these terms into contemporary philosophical language;

age; choosing such equivalents of the old terminology that would best reflect its content;

- 3) identification of the theory of the subject of philosophy and theory of science of the researched author, and selecting the most adequate modern terminology;
- 4) reconstruction of the vision of reality (theory of metaphysics) in the researched author¹⁵.

Gogacz points out that the concepts of the subject of philosophy and the theory of science are based on the vision of reality, and in turn it influences the terminology. In consequence, the above-mentioned research steps take the form of working hypotheses, and they are ultimately determined by the vision of reality cognized at the end. This also means that after cognizing them, the three research steps preceding their reading must be verified. Only after this verification and corrections we can consider this research procedure as completed. For this reason – and to avoid the allegation of a vicious circle – at the seminar on the history of philosophy, prof. Swieżawski (as reported by Gogacz) – mentioned two stages of the interpretative work: “workshop stage” and “interpretative stage”¹⁶. Gogacz, however, distances himself from this proposition and proposes to stick to Gilson’s division of the history of philosophy into types that differ in objects and methodology. Therefore, he postulates to analyze the content of

¹⁴ M. Gogacz, *Historia filozofii w poszukiwaniu realizmu*, p. 35-36.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 34-35.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

philosophical texts (in the second type of Gilson's history of philosophy) in several successive research steps:

- 1) reading the text in accordance with the rules and sense of the language in which it was created;
- 2) establishing the subject theory of philosophy and theory of science in which the author formulated his thoughts;
- 3) recognition of a vision of reality or directly the theory of being;
- 4) translation into today's understandable philosophical language of terminology, the theory of the subject of philosophy and theory of science, as well as vision or theory of being.

These research steps seem to correspond to the "literary forms" by means of which the historian of philosophy informs about his results. These forms, according to Gogacz, are as follows:

- 1) the summary is a faithful representation of the content of the text, "without

own comment and specifying the discussed thought";

- 2) a review is characterized by the advantage of one's own comment over discussing the content;
- 3) the research paper is an analysis of the issues discussed in the study text or in the study of the author on a broad erudite background, in the light of various opinions and various *modi philosophandi*¹⁷.

Gogacz also emphasizes, like Swieżawski, that a subjective problem (as opposed to the objective problems posed by the text under study) may be the influence of research attitudes resulting from the researcher's own philosophical beliefs. Gogacz believes that the methodological way to overcome them is to reveal these own philosophical beliefs. "Only under such conditions," he emphasizes, "can we begin to read the philosophy contained in the text under study"¹⁸.

A proper history of philosophy

Gilson's "third stage" of the history of philosophy consists, as Stefan Swieżawski puts it, the study of "pure and bare" philosophical concepts and their mutual connections¹⁹. On this perspective, we only see the history of one universal philosophy, different from particular philosophical views and various ways of philosophizing. It can therefore be said that the first stage consists in the study

of texts, the second one consists in the views of philosophers, and only in the third stage, there is philosophy itself (*history of philosophy itself*). The last stage requires the eminently philosophical competences of a historian of philosophy, supplemented with a specific historical workshop. S. Swieżawski tried to create a methodology for such research. Thus, he proposed that the researcher

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 30.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 35.

¹⁹ S. Swieżawski, *Zagadnienie historii filozofii*, Warszawa 1966, p. 293.

should read the text twice. The first reading is to establish the basic metaphysical theses in a text, in an author or in a philosophical school. The “philosophical questionnaire” which the historian of philosophy fills in during this first reading is very helpful here. The second reading was to determine the formula of other philosophical views in a text, e.g. ethical, epistemological or any other. He also proposed, as already mentioned, two stages in the editing of the results of these studies.

It is worth noting, what Stanisław Janeczek interestingly mentions, that it is extremely difficult in academic practice to study the history of philosophy as the history of philosophical problems themselves, especially when the achievements of the studied authors or schools are not significantly original and creative, as is the case, for example, in the history of philosophy in Poland, or as in the case of the philosophy of the Renaissance which is strongly involved in the political, social and economic context. Janeczek points out that even a researcher such as Stefan Swieżawski, found it very difficult to implement Gilson’s history of philosophy itself in relation to the history of European philosophy in the 15th century, because it was definitely ametaphysical, and yet very much involved in political, social, religious and even economic issues. As a result, Swieżawski created - according to Janeczek - a monumental image of the philosophical culture of the 15th century²⁰. From

this point of view, it is often said that Gilson’s “second stage” is an unsurpassed model, an ideal towards which the work of a historian is pursued, research work should come closer to this ideal, but the ideal is never achieved by itself.

M. Gogacz sees it differently and calls Gilson’s history of philosophy itself “the history of the consequences of philosophical problems”. He also shows that in the history of philosophy certain theses had specific consequences. For example, he mentions that realism and pluralism at the starting point lead to the question of the first cause and when a philosopher did not want to bring about such consequences, he was forced to modify the starting points of his philosophy in a certain way. Gogacz adds that the historian of philosophy examines the starting points of philosophical reflection and shows their specifications and consequences in the history of philosophy. It seems that he formulates the theory of the subject of the history of philosophy more carefully than Gilson and draws practical consequences from the realism of the historian of philosophy, which Gilson himself postulated at every step. He emphasizes that, firstly, the historian of philosophy examines only the consequences of philosophical views that actually existed in the history of philosophy, and secondly, he does not study their truthfulness (because this belongs to the systematic philosopher. Instead, he “studies them because they appeared in history and were somehow resolved, and

²⁰ See S. Janeczek, *Między filozoficzną historią filozofii a historią kultury. Z rozważań nad metodą historii filozofii w Polsce*, „Roczniki Filozoficzne” 55 (2007)1, p. 103-105.

also they brought about some historically popular philosophical consequences²¹. He emphasizes that the history of philosophy is primarily intended to serve philosophy itself; however, it is less suitable,

for example, in the history of culture, which is more interested in the functioning of cultural trends than in philosophical statements.

Conclusions

The first set of conclusions about Gilson's concept of the history of philosophy concerns the ordering of its trends and subject. It seems that it is worth using the aforementioned trends - Gilson mentioned three such trends, although sometimes, when he wanted to emphasize the difference of his own concept, he talked about the first one and the second taken together. Today, in the era of developed historical and philosophical studies, one should rather take advantage of M. Gogacz's proposals, which recognize four trends: the editorial trend (it is about critical publishing of texts); the trend of researching on the history of philosophical writing; interpretative trend concerning authors; interpretative trend concerning philosophical problems. And following Gogacz's suggestion that each of these trends is characterized by a different subject, I propose to look at these trends from the point of view of the subject of each of them.

So, the first one, editorial trend will have as its material subject various philosophical archives: manuscripts, incunabula, and some old prints. Its formal *quod* object, i.e. its purpose will be to publish the correct version of the text. On the other hand, the subject of the

formal *quo*, i.e., the set of methods will contain a broad range of historical methods (palaeographic, editorial, linguistic and other necessary due to the nature of the work).

The second trend, which focuses on the research on the history of philosophical texts and writings, is often associated with the editorial trend, but formally it is something else, as it requires completely different tools and competences. The material subject of this trend will be philosophical texts, and the purpose - their historical and philosophical development in terms of authorship, provenance and history. It can, therefore, be said that the formal *quod* object of this trend is historical and philosophical erudition, while the formal *quo* object is historical and interpretative method.

The third trend concerns the interpretation of philosophers. Its material object is; hence, philosophical texts. The researcher is interested in them in terms of the philosophical views contained therein (the formal *quod* object). He studies on the methods of analysis and interpretation of philosophical texts.

The fourth trend, concerning the history of philosophical problems, also has philosophical texts as its material sub-

²¹ M. Gogacz, *Historia filozofii w poszukiwaniu realizmu*, p. 37.

ject, but it is more interested in the philosophical problems contained in them, examined from the aspect of their presuppositions and consequences. The most characteristic of this trend is the methodology of research, in which the philosophical methods predominate over historical research.

The differences between the above-mentioned trends in the history of philosophy are best seen from the point of view of the researcher's workshop and competences. In the editorial trend, historical methods prevail, mainly from the auxiliary disciplines of history: palaeography, editing, linguistic competences, sometimes archivistics, chronology, and others. In the trend concerning the history of texts, also historical methods dominate. Of course, a rich historical and philosophical erudition is indispensable here. In the interpretative trend concerning philosophers, the most important thing is the specific workshop of the historian of philosophy, which includes the methods of interpreting philosophical texts. In the field of interpretation, the strict philosophical methods prevail over the historical ones.

Two practical conclusions seem to emerge from these comparisons. The first one concerns the sequence of historical and philosophical research. This sequence is specific, as the necessary condition for each stage is to complete the previous one. There cannot be a reasonable interpretation of philosophical problems, especially in the version proposed by Gilson, that is, researching their sources and consequences if a researcher does not have a solid knowledge of the studied authors. We know all this from the texts, so we must have both the correct version and the history related to them.

The second practical conclusion concerns the historian of philosophy himself - his or her workshop and competence. It seems that the historian of philosophy must have, above all, philosophical competences, supplemented with a historical workshop and possibly additional skills related to the nature of his work (linguistic, technical ones).

It follows, then, that the historian of philosophy is first and foremost a philosopher, and the history of philosophy is more philosophy than history.

Gilsonowska metoda historii filozofii

Słowa kluczowe: Étienne Gilson, historia filozofii, filozofia, metodologia, *history of philosophy itself*

Gilsonowska koncepcja historii filozofii, określana jest też mianem „filozoficznej” koncepcji historii filozofii. Wynika bowiem z przekonania, że dzieje filozofii mają swój filozoficzny sens. Polega ona zatem na badaniu właśnie problematyki filozoficznej w dziejach filozofii z akcentem na położonym na jej filozoficzności, a nie historyczności. Tak rozumiana historia filozofii należy do dyscyplin filozoficznych, a nie historycznych. Z tego punktu widzenia też określa się specyficznie filozoficzne kompetencje historyka filozofii, uzupełnione dodatkowo o określony warsztat historyczny.

Z tego punktu widzenia możemy wyróżnić cztery nurty badań historyczno-filozoficznych: nurt edytorski (chodzi o krytyczne wydawanie tekstów); nurt badań nad dziejami piśmiennictwa filozoficznego; nurt interpretacyjny, dotyczący autorów; nurt interpretacyjny, dotyczący problemów filozoficznych. Każdy z tych nurtów charakteryzuje się odmiennym przedmiotem i własną metodologią.

Z tych rozważań wynikają dwa wnioski praktyczne. Pierwszy z nich

dotyczy kolejności badań historyczno-filozoficznych. Ta kolejność jest specyficzna, gdyż warunkiem koniecznym każdego z etapów jest dokonanie poprzedniego. Nie może być bowiem odpowiedzialnej interpretacji problemów filozoficznych, szczególnie w takiej wersji, jaką zaproponował Gilson, czyli badania ich źródeł i konsekwencji, jeśli nie będziemy mieli solidnej wiedzy o filozofach, które te problemy formułowali. To zaś wszystko wiemy z tekstów, wobec czego musimy dysponować zarówno poprawną ich wersją, jak i znać związaną z nimi historię.

Drugi wniosek praktyczny dotyczy samego historyka filozofii – jego warsztatu i kompetencji. Wydaje się, że muszą być to przede wszystkim kompetencje filozoficzne, uzupełnione o warsztat historyczny i ewentualnie dodatkowe umiejętności, związane z charakterem wykonywanej pracy (językowe, techniczne).

Wynika więc z tego, że historyk filozofii jest przede wszystkim filozofem, a historia filozofii jest bardziej filozofią niż historią.

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