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Taking Holism Seriously: A Reply to Critics

I would like to thank Professors Dodson, Gendler, and Gracia for their thoughtful responses to my work. I am particularly thankful because their critical comments have prompted me to reflect further on how I would situate the arguments of The Logic of the History of Ideas in relation to trends in both the philosophy of history and (post)analytic philosophy more generally. Indeed, I want to begin now by considering how to situate my arguments since I think doing so will enable me to move swiftly to many of the pertinent issues raised by Dodson, Gendler, and Gracia.

When discussing the Logic with historical theorists, I realized that my use of philosophy, especially (post)analytic philosophy, was itself a controversial move.¹ The dominant modes of historical theorizing today seem to be an emphasis on rhetoric and poetics associated with Hayden White and one on sociology and power associated with Michel Foucault. (Post)analytic philosophy in comparison occupies a relatively small space. One reason for the marginalization of (post)analytic philosophy is, I suspect, that its practitioners have almost entirely withdrawn from the field. While the concerns and arguments of analytic philosophers have changed quite noticeably over the last twenty to thirty years, these changes have occurred within an increasingly narrow disciplinary focus on questions of mind, language, and epistemology. They have had almost no impact on the philosophy of history. The Logic thus seeks to reassert the claims of philosophy to speak to history.

There are, as far as I know, two main bodies of literature within which analytic philosophers already speak to issues in the philosophy of history. The first arises out of

the debates of thirty to forty years ago over the nature of causation and explanation in history.² The second, of which Gracia's own work is an outstanding example, concerns textuality, authorial meaning, and interpretation.³ While the former is rather dated, the latter has tended to be pulled closer to literary than historical theory. More importantly still, the analytic philosophers involved, in both cases, seem to me to have neglected to take holism seriously. Philosophical holism has been integral to the changing concerns and arguments of philosophers over the last twenty or thirty years.⁴ It has informed the broad shift – apparent in the work of, say, Donald Davidson and W. V. O. Quine as well as the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein – from the decomposition of concepts into their constituents to the elucidation of concepts in their relations to one another. It prompts the suspicion that the constant dissection of concepts using finer and finer distinctions can descend into futile casuistry. It encourages instead a contextualizing and synthesizing approach. Indeed, because holism challenges any rigid distinction between synthetic and analytic propositions, it prompts us put the prefix “post” in front of the label “analytic philosophy”.

Holism has transformed the content and style of analytic philosophy, yet it has had little impact on the philosophy of history. In what follows, I want to highlight how, and why, holism leads me to steer clear of positions urged upon me by Dodson, Gendler, and Gracia.

I

Let me begin with the nature of my project. The Logic provides a philosophical analysis of the forms of reasoning appropriate to intellectual history – it is a normative,

second-order study of a discipline. It does so, moreover, through exploring our concepts as they inform intellectual history – concepts such as meaning, belief, and tradition. The notion that philosophy is, at least in part, a logical inquiry into first-order disciplines has been made familiar by the logical positivists, although, of course, holism unsettles their easy distinction between the analytic and the synthetic. Yet Gracia suggests a properly philosophical approach would appear not only in the nature of my inquiry but also in the way I conceive of the object of that inquiry. He contrasts a philosophical conception of intellectual history – the study of the logical relations between ideas – with sociological and hermeneutic alternatives. Presumably we could subject each of his three approaches to philosophical or logical scrutiny; we could investigate the grammar of our concepts in relation to each of them. Gracia does not ask if the Logic is a work of philosophy – he accepts it is. Rather, he asks whether its philosophical analysis of intellectual history presents that discipline as a philosophical one concerned with the logical relationships between ideas – he concludes it does not since my reduction of ideas to beliefs renders intellectual history a sociological discipline. Is he right?

To understand how the Logic presents the history of ideas, we need to return to the holistic nature of recent philosophy. Holism suggests that the truth-conditions of any proposition depend on the other propositions we take to be true. One implication of this is that there are no metaphysically pure concepts standing alone with fixed meanings. Propositions – ideas – cannot have innate meanings. Their meanings necessarily depend on the webs of belief in which they are located. Indeed, they possess meaning only in relation to humans, since humans alone can provide the background theories that define

their content. An idea has no meaning – no existence – apart from as a belief within a wider web of beliefs. Thus, the history of ideas must be the history of beliefs.

This reduction of ideas to beliefs troubles Gracia on the grounds that ideas are not things people must hold. Yet the notion of “hold” is ambiguous. If “to hold” means “to accept P as true”, then he is right to say we can think of the idea of a flat earth without thinking about its relation to someone who holds it. But my concept of belief clearly cannot entail “accepting as true” since I allow for cases of deception in which expressed beliefs differ from actual ones. Hence, by “to hold” I must mean “to give content to P by locating it in a theoretical context adopted at least hypothetically”. Surely, moreover, holism implies we can not think of an idea without its having a relation to someone who, in this sense, holds it? Surely when we think of the idea, we ourselves give it meaning by surrounding it with theories or beliefs we hold at least hypothetically? At this point, Gracia might again gesture at Plato’s notion of mind-independent ideas that are never held by anyone. However, holism, with its postfoundationalist orientation, forces us to forsake precisely this notion of metaphysically pure, mind-independent ideas with a defined content independent of all background sets of theories. We are left, then, with a principle of procedural individualism according to which meanings are always meanings for specific people; they are always beliefs held, albeit hypothetically, by particular individuals.

Holism pushes us to analyze intellectual history as the history of beliefs. Does this analysis of the discipline make it sociological, logical, or hermeneutic, in Gracia’s sense of these three terms? In brief, intellectual history mixes the sociological and the logical but it precludes the hermeneutic. Like the sociological approach, I do not allow

for ideas existing independently of mind: I suggest webs of belief always arise against the background of social traditions. Unlike the sociological approach, however, I do not take the relation of ideas to specific minds to require us to focus on the economic, political, or institutional background to thought. Rather, I suggest we need to explore beliefs, at least initially, as consistent webs – we should unpack the relations between them to show how the individual brought them together. Like the logical approach, therefore, I understand intellectual history to be intimately concerned with the relationships between concepts or beliefs – if we know X believed P, Q, and R, one way of explaining why X believed S is to show how S fits in with P, Q, and R. Unlike the logical approach, however, I do not equate this study of the relations between concepts understood as beliefs with the study of the relations between concepts that are allegedly mind-independent. Intellectual history thus stands as the study of past beliefs in their logical, and at times sociological, settings. Again, because beliefs are always held, at least hypothetically, by people, this analysis of intellectual history precludes a hermeneutic approach in that it forswears all interest in the meanings utterances have had for specific people and concentrates instead on the interpretation of texts in themselves. Holism, with its repudiation of mind-independent meanings, clearly implies texts cannot have meanings in themselves.

So, the Logic provides a second-order inquiry into a discipline. It is, in this sense, manifestly a work of philosophy, not sociology. In addition, although holism leads me to reduce the history of ideas to a history of beliefs, my analysis of the forms of explanation appropriate to beliefs emphasizes the elucidation of the conceptual relations between the beliefs that make up webs of belief. In this sense, the Logic portrays the history of ideas as being at least as close to philosophy, with its concern with conceptual relations, as to

sociology, with its rather different concerns. Perhaps Gracia will continue to lament the fact that the Logic insists these conceptual relations are always conceptual relations in the webs of beliefs of specific people rather than between mind-independent concepts. Still, if we are to take holism seriously, we cannot think of intellectual history in the terms he urges upon us, since we have to renounce the very idea of metaphysically pure, mind-independent concepts.

II

Having considered the nature of my project, let me turn now to the tools with which I undertake it. The Logic proceeds principally on the basis of analysis supported by various examples. In the first chapter – “On Analytic Philosophy” – I offer an account of the role of deductive and inductive examples in (post)analytic philosophy. Gendler has a few minor quibbles and an underlying dissatisfaction with this account. Her quibbles prompt her to remind us that we sometimes have intuitions about general propositions and that deductive arguments sometimes refer to particulars. As she says, neither of these quibbles constitutes anything more than a “friendly amendment” to the Logic: indeed, as I write throughout about the “typical”, not the “exclusive”, form and role of different types of examples, I already allow that they sometimes have the rather different forms and roles of which she here reminds us. Yet in responding thus, I might reinforce her underlying dissatisfaction with what she seems to regard as my vagueness at certain key moments – my stopping a few steps short in the analysis of crucial concepts.

Should I have provided a more detailed analysis of things such as the form and role of different types of examples? What is at issue here, I believe, is the extent to

which philosophy requires us to engage in analysis conceived as a constant appeal to finer and finer distinctions and classifications – a meticulous dissection and specification of concepts. Gendler appears to want us to pursue analysis to the point where we at last define our concepts with absolute precision, ensuring they lack the vagueness that comes from having their meaning dependent upon implicit, unstated background theories. In contrast, I believe holism should make us suspicious of an analytical one-upmanship in which we foist ever more precise distinctions upon one another.

Recently historians have begun to show how analytic philosophy arose with a debt to idealism as well as a critique of it.⁵ In this view, analysis stands as a technique by which philosophers might grasp the true meaning of “ideal” concepts. More prosaically, we might look upon analytical one-upmanship as an attempt to define propositions and concepts with such precision that their meanings at last will become entirely transparent independently of all unstated theoretical assumptions. Analysis represents the path by which we might arrive at metaphysically pure concepts. Holism suggests, however, that this heroic vision of analysis is an impossible dream. As we have seen, holists argue we never can define a concept so as to give it a meaning independent of a larger body of theories. No matter how many distinctions we draw, no matter how many of our theories we make explicit, these distinctions and theories – and so the concept of concern to us – always will gain meaning only when situated within a wider web of beliefs. The crucial point here is that analysis can never lead to a pure concept with given content. There is always room for further dissection through more refined analysis, additional distinctions, and greater elaboration of pertinent theories. The only way to avoid an infinite regress is to bring analysis to a halt at some point. Consequently, analysis cannot be a good in and

of itself. What matters is, rather, that we pursue analysis to a point appropriate to the topic that concerns us. To pursue it beyond this point looks like mere hairsplitting casuistry.

Of course there is room for further dissection and elaboration of my analyses of deductive and inductive arguments and of their role in philosophical argument – indeed, I share Gendler’s suspicion that she and I are after much the same thing here. From the perspective of a holist, however, the pertinent question is whether or not my analysis is adequately detailed for the matters being considered. I believe it is, primarily because I suspect the relevant concepts are themselves vague. Surely if a concept is vague, the analysis of that concept should be vague in similar respects? I believe my analysis is adequately detailed for the matters being considered, secondly, because even if the relevant concepts were not vague, a finer grained analysis of them would not seem to have any purchase for the broader matters I consider. Perhaps Gendler will continue to lament my failure to analyze concepts such as “deduction” and “induction” by reference to a list of necessary and sufficient conditions that would fix their meaning independently of the wider holistic commitments and concerns of the Logic. Still, if we are to take holism seriously, we cannot think of analysis in these terms since holism suggests the meaning of a concept always depends on a wider web of beliefs, so any list of the necessary and sufficient conditions of its application would mistakenly treat the vague as if it were precise.

Whereas Gracia urges us to explore the logical relations between metaphysically pure concepts, Gendler would have us deploy ever more complex analysis in a search for such concepts. Holism, in rejecting the very possibility of such concepts, encourages us

to rethink the nature of (post)analytic philosophy in general as well as the philosophy of history in particular.

III

Having considered both the nature of my project and the tools I use, let me turn now to the positions I defend. The Logic offers an analysis of the forms of reasoning appropriate to intellectual history: it explores the forms of explanation and justification appropriate to the historical study of beliefs. We can begin here with the standard form of explanation appropriate to sincere, conscious, and rational beliefs. (Although the Logic also considers how we should explain deception, the unconscious, and irrationality, these matters need not detain us.) In brief, I argue historians can explain particular beliefs by locating them in the context of the wider webs of belief of which they are part, they can begin to explain these webs of belief by reference to the traditions against the background of which people reach initial webs of belief, and they can explain changes in people's beliefs by reference to dilemmas conceived as new beliefs people adopt whether due to experiences or reasoning. Dodson suggests that this standard form of explanation does not allow sufficiently for a perspectival approach incorporating methodological reductionism. He urges upon us the possibility of starting with one area of life – such as an experience of the social largely determined by people's class – and tracing its impact upon beliefs and traditions.

The Logic allows for, and even encourages, something closely akin to Dodson's perspectival approach by promoting pragmatic concepts of tradition and dilemma as opposed to reified or essentialist ones. As we have seen, holism pushes us towards a

principle of procedural individualism according to which meanings are always meanings for specific people within their wider webs of belief. Procedural individualism implies, moreover, that traditions and dilemmas must be emergent entities based on the beliefs of individuals, rather than reified entities with a given core of ideas or debates. So, while the concept of tradition reminds us that people always reach their webs of belief against the background of a social inheritance that influences them, it does not provide a series of chunks that cut up this amorphous background in a given way. Historians cannot point to traditions as if they were natural kinds manifesting themselves in the beliefs of specific people. Instead, historians postulate a tradition – they cut a discrete chunk out of an amorphous background – on the grounds that doing so best explains the particular set of beliefs of concern to them. Thus, if one historian wants to explain Locke’s web of beliefs and another wants to explain the beliefs about private property shared by Harrington, Hobbes, and Locke, they might well postulate different traditions reflecting their different interests in, or perspectives on, the past. Again, if historians want to explore the impact of the dilemma posed by the rise of commerce for people indebted to traditions such as natural jurisprudence and civic humanism, they might begin by defining the dilemma sufficiently broadly to encompass the diverse ways such people conceived of it and then go on to explore the ways in which this belief prompted people to modify their old webs of belief – a process of change I liken to the ever fainter ripples a stone sends out when dropped in a pond.

Dodson is right, however, to recognize that even this pragmatic stance toward traditions and dilemmas does not take me where he wants to go. For a start, whereas Dodson wants historians to begin with experiences determined by people’s location in a

class structure, I offer as starting points either dilemmas, which can include interpreted experiences, or traditions. We disagree about whether people can have pure experiences defined by their social position or whether all experiences are necessarily interpreted from within a web of beliefs. Holism, we might recall, implies all meanings depend on the web of beliefs in which they are located. Hence, holists argue that our beliefs can encounter the world only as a whole and they thereby suggest theory plays an ineluctable role in perception. From a holist's perspective, the nature of an experience – the truth conditions by which would define any proposition about an experience – always depends on the wider web of beliefs in which it is located. We cannot assume people in social location X will have an experience Y since the content of their experiences will depend in part on the theories they bring to bear upon them. If we take holism seriously, we cannot think of intellectual history in the way Dodson urges us to: we can adopt perspectives to suit our interests, we can cut traditions and dilemmas to explore particular issues, but we cannot straightforwardly reduce traditions and dilemmas to experiences governed by a social fact such as the class structure of society.

IV

The Logic offers an analysis of the form of justification, as well as the forms of explanation, appropriate to intellectual history. Indeed, I suggest the form of justification outlined in the Logic constitutes a general epistemology. Because holism precludes any appeal to pure experiences or given facts, my epistemology relies on shared facts and the possibility of evaluating rival accounts of these facts in terms of criteria of comparison

such as accuracy, consistency, and comprehensiveness. It then uses appeals to the nature of our being in the world to fend off charges of relativism and irrationalism.

Dodson, Gendler, and Gracia all raise questions about this epistemology. Gendler asks for a more detailed analysis of “fact”. In particular, she wonders about the status of non-observational fact candidates such as the axioms of mathematics. Well, I would locate such axioms not as examples of facts but under the heading of “consistency” (one of the criteria I suggest we use to evaluate rival sets of belief), which I define in terms of “the accepted principles of logic” (p.102). She also wonders how I can talk about “how things really are” given I renounce appeals to given facts. Well, I argue that the best web of beliefs available to us, defined in terms of my criteria of comparison, includes a notion of “the world” or “how things really are”. Once we accept this notion of “the world”, moreover, I suggest we should see our shared facts, and the experiences they embody, as sticking to the world by virtue of being experiences of it, but also – at least if we take holism seriously – as being able to differ from the world by virtue of being theory-laden. While this view of “facts” seems clear enough, Gendler might still lament its vagueness. In this case, of course, I would say the vagueness of the analysis suits the vagueness of the concept, and to dissect the concept further would be to risk hairsplitting casuistry.

Gracia’s questions about my epistemology concern the criteria of comparison not the analysis of “fact”. He wonders where I get them from and whether or not they are independent of all points of view. The criteria themselves are derived, by analysis, as implications of accepting holism. As such, of course, the criteria are internal to a holistic view, not independent of all views, although there might well be considerable overlaps with the criteria postulated within other views. However, the criteria being part of a

particular point of view does not mean, as Gracia suggests, that my epistemology falls into relativism. As I have just indicated, I fend off relativism not by an appeal to these criteria and their neutrality, but by reference to an argument about the nature of our being in the world. In very brief terms, the argument is that while others might have different facts and different criteria, the nature of our being in the world, especially the way our perceptions stick to the world, ensures we and the others will be able to come to understand each others' beliefs and practices in a way that will generate at least some shared facts and criteria. Perhaps Gracia will lament the fact that the Logic insists these shared facts and criteria always arise within specific encounters rather than as positions to which we can appeal independent of all contexts. Yet if we take holism seriously we cannot specify in advance the criteria that will arise in any such encounter. All we can do is to give an argument of the sort I do to show they will arise. Holism forces us to confront relativism understood as the absence of a neutral position we can specify, but it still allows us to suggest relativism does not arise as a practical problem since the possibility of such a position appears within any given encounter.

Dodson accepts we can appeal to a mind-independent, external reality as I have been doing when we are considering the natural world, but he argues we cannot do so when considering social life since our concepts are constitutive of the social world. I agree with him about the constitutive nature of concepts in our social life, but I do not think this undercuts my epistemology in the way he suggests. For a start, although much of our social world rests upon concepts we share, this does not undermine the argument, which I just reiterated in response to Gendler, that we should postulate a world existing independently of us. It does not do so because the "we" differs in each case. So, the

social world rests on concepts embedded in practices “we as a society” engage in, but these practices exist independently for “a we of individuals”. “You and I as individuals” postulate a social world that exists independently of our theoretical grasp of it even though it is constituted in large part by concepts widely shared among us and the other members of our society. Much of the social world is thus both given to us as individuals and yet created by us as a group. Let us turn now to the implications of the constitutive nature of concepts within the social world for the argument with which I just responded to Gracia; that is, that our being in the world ensures the possibility in any encounter of a shared set of facts and epistemic criteria. Although the constructed nature of the social implies it is not given or common across cultures, this does not undermine the idea that a common culture can arise within any encounter between different cultures. We should accept that different groups might construct very different ways of life on the basis of different sets of beliefs. Yet we also should fend-off relativism as a practical problem by insisting that an encounter between such groups always opens up the possibility of their understanding each other in a way that will provide them with a shared set of facts and criteria.

V

The Logic of the History of Ideas thus offers an anthropological form of justification such that we can avoid relativism without being foundationalist. It also suggests we should seek to explain hermeneutic meanings by reference to webs of belief, traditions, dilemmas, and distortions, each of which it subjects to further analysis. In making these arguments it engages with epistemology, the philosophy of language, and

the philosophy of mind so as to examine the philosophical nature of social life generally. I appeal to philosophers such as Davidson, Quine, and Wittgenstein because I want to speak to history from a philosophical position that takes holism seriously. Moreover, I suspect Gendler finds my appeals to these philosophers “somewhat foreign” because philosophy has largely ceased to speak to history in a way that means we have had no real discussion about what implications this powerful movement toward holism has for the philosophy of history. I very much hope the Logic will help to initiate such discussion. It will certainly do so if it continues to spark insightful and engaged reactions of the kind offered by Dodson, Gendler, and Gracia.

¹ See the Round Table on The Logic of the History of Ideas (with contributions by Kari Palonen, Siep Stuurman, Frank Ankersmit, and Allan Megill), and also the ensuing correspondence between myself and Frank Ankersmit, published in Rethinking History 4 (2000), 295-372.

² For an account of the relevant debates see M. Murphy, “Explanation, Causes, and Covering Laws”, History and Theory 25 (1986), 43-57.

³ Eg. J. Gracia, A Theory of Textuality: The Logic and Epistemology (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995); and J. Gracia, Texts: Ontological Status, Identity, Author, Audience (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996).

⁴ Compare J. Fodor & E. LePore, Holism: A Shopper’s Guide (Oxford: Blackwells, 1991).

⁵ P. Hylton, Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). On the place of metaphysically pure, linguistic or conceptual identities in analytic thought also see J. Dejnozka, The Ontology of the Analytic Tradition and Its Origins: Realism and Identity in Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Quine (Lanham, MD: Littlefield Adams, 1996). Explicit attempts to consider the notion of a “crisis” or “decline” within analytic philosophy – the turn to (post)analytic philosophy – within a historical context include A. Biletzki & A. Matar, eds., The Story of Analytic Philosophy: Plot and Heroes (New York: Routledge, 1998); and P. Hacker, Wittgenstein’s Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).